

The Challenge of Living Sustainably

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
At St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, April 24, 2022.

Acts 9:1-20

Some years ago I had the opportunity to spend a few days on the campus of Warren Wilson College, a Presbyterian-related school located in the mountains of Western North Carolina. Warren Wilson was founded in 1894 as the Asheville Farm School by Presbyterian missionaries who sought to bring educational opportunities to young men living in rural Appalachia. By 1966, it had grown to become a four-year liberal arts college. It is an unusual school in that its curriculum consists of three components: academic study, hands-on work, and service learning. In addition to their regular courses, Warren Wilson students work 15 hours a week on any one of more than 100 work crews, which are responsible for keeping the college in operation on a day-to-day basis. Students do everything from maintaining campus buildings to assisting with college administration to growing food on the college's organic farm. During their four years at Warren Wilson, students are also required to devote at least 100 hours to off-campus service learning projects, which may be in a nearby community or far away in another country.

What impressed me most about Warren Wilson College was its emphasis on environmental sustainability, which is why I wanted to tell you about it on this Earth Day Sunday. The college's 275-acre farm uses sustainable agriculture techniques, which have led to the farm being certified "river-friendly." The school has an extensive recycling program, including a "Free Store" offering all sorts of reusable items salvaged from trash. Students compost nearly all of the food waste from the dining hall, turning it into rich organic fertilizer for the college's vegetable gardens, which are also pesticide free. Students also manage a 640-acre forest for multiple uses including growing mushrooms for food and

harvesting trees for lumber using sustainable logging practices. Some students live in an EcoDorm, a green building constructed largely of recycled materials, and which uses solar energy, recycled rainwater, and composting toilets in its operation. Warren Wilson also boasts one of the first buildings on a college or university campus to achieve Gold Certification under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system. The Orr Cottage, which houses the college admissions office, was built by Warren Wilson students using stone from nearby mountains and wood from the college's forest. It uses 50% less energy than a conventional building of the same size. Given this focus on environmental sustainability, you probably won't be surprised to hear that one quarter of the 800 students at Warren Wilson College are environmental studies majors.

It was exciting to spend a few days at Warren Wilson College and to see all the things that can be done to better care for the earth, to lessen our impact on the earth's fragile ecosystem and its limited natural resources. I came away inspired, with a renewed commitment to go home and try my hand again at growing an organic vegetable garden, which I did then and continue to do today, albeit on a very small scale.

It also got me thinking about how I live my life and to what extent my lifestyle is environmentally sustainable or unsustainable. What would it take, I wondered, for me to live in a way that was truly environmentally sustainable? What would I have to change about my lifestyle such that the earth could sustain everyone in the world at my new standard of living?

To help me answer these questions I found a number of tools on the internet -- quizzes and calculators to use to determine one's ecological footprint and/or carbon footprint. The Ecological Footprint Calculator asks 15 questions. Based on your answers, it estimates how much of the earth's resources are required to support your lifestyle. It also lets you compare your Ecological Footprint with that of others and with the total resources

available on the planet. I took the quiz, answering the questions as honestly as I could.

How often do you eat animal based products?

Often, I answered. I probably eat meat or fish two or three times a week. I eat cheese, and I put milk on my cereal and in my tea.

How much of the food that you eat is unprocessed, unpackaged, or locally grown?

Not much of it. I said 30%, but that's probably wishful thinking on my part. A lot of the food I eat comes in a box or a can or from the frozen food section. And while the fresh fruits and vegetables I eat aren't processed or packaged, most of them have been transported from other states or other countries.

Which housing type best describes your home?

Free standing house with running water.

What material is your house constructed with?

Some adobe, but mostly wood.

How many people live in your household?

Two.

What is the size of your home?

At 2100 square feet, the calculator considered it "large."

Do you have electricity in your home?

Yes

How energy efficient is your home?

Above average, I said. It is insulated and has efficient lighting and appliances.

What percentage of your home's electricity comes from renewable sources?

I wasn't sure about this, so I put down 20%, the percentage of electricity that PNM is supposed to generate from renewable resources according to the state.

Compared to your neighbors, how much trash do you generate?
Less, I thought.

How far do you travel by car or motorcycle each week?
Averaged over a year, I put about 200 miles a week on my car.

What is the average fuel economy of the vehicles you use most often?
My Honda Fit gets about 32 miles per gallon.

When you travel by car, how often do you carpool?
Infrequently. Only when Susan and I are driving somewhere together.

On average, how far do you travel on public transportation each week?
Not far. I rarely take a train or bus.

How many hours do you fly each year?
This past year I spent 28 hours in the air to complete one roundtrip to the East Coast and one roundtrip to Hawaii.

End of quiz. The result? My current lifestyle requires 9.3 global hectares of biologically productive land area. That's a little more than the average Ecological Footprint in the United States, which is 8 global hectares per person. But worldwide, there exist only 1.7 biologically productive hectares per person. That means that if everyone lived like I do, we would need 5.7 earths to sustain everyone. Bottom line? My current lifestyle is very far from being environmentally sustainable. Putting out my recycling every week and replacing incandescent light bulbs with CFLs and LEDs may be helpful, but it's small potatoes compared to the drastic changes that are needed.

What could I do to reduce my ecological footprint? I began changing my answers to the quiz to see what would happen.

What if I gave up my car and bought a motorbike with which to get around, carpooling with others only when absolutely necessary? That would reduce the size of my footprint by 20%, but it would still require 4.5 earths to sustain everyone at that lifestyle. What if I shifted to a vegan diet, eating no more meat or dairy products, as I know some of you have done? That would reduce my footprint a little more. What if I followed a friend's example, and not only gave up my car, but used a bicycle to get around instead of a motorbike? Together, those changes would bring my ecological footprint down to 5.6 global hectares. But if everyone lived like that, we would still need the resources of 3.3 earths!

What would I have to do to reduce my ecological footprint to the point that our one earth could sustain everyone at the same level? I would have to become a vegan vegetarian and eat only locally grown foods with little or no processing or packaging. I would have to move into a green-design building incorporating energy conservation measures with less than 1000 square feet of living area. And I would have to travel exclusively by foot or bicycle. No cars, no motorbikes, no buses, trains, or planes. To us, that may sound like an awfully Spartan way to live, but for many people in the world it would be a vast improvement over their current circumstances. In this scenario, I would still have a decent home in which to live, with clean, running water, electricity available 24 hours a day, and enough food to eat. That's more than many people have. But having grown up in an upper middle class family in the United States, it feels like an impossibly difficult lifestyle change to make.

It's distressing to me. I consider myself to be very much aware of the environmental issues facing the world today. I am genuinely concerned about them. And I claim that environmental values are important to me. But I am forced to admit that there is a huge disconnect between the values I espouse and the consumer lifestyle I enjoy. And if that's true of me, what about the millions of people who don't even claim to care about the environment? What will it take to wake us all up, to change our way of thinking,

and to change our way of living, in order to address the environmental crisis effectively?

Will it take a Damascus Road Experience like that of Saul to reorient our lives? Saul persecuted the early followers of Jesus. He threatened them with arrest and execution. But then Jesus appeared to him in a vision that left him blind for three days. With the help of fellow travelers and the disciple Ananias, Saul made it to Damascus and there regained his sight. The experience produced in Saul a radical transformation from being a persecutor of the early church to being one of its greatest advocates.

Similarly, we who currently threaten the earth must undergo a radical transformation such that we will become its greatest advocates. Somehow we must come to see the light and reorient our lives toward environmentally sustainable living. We cannot do it alone. Like Paul, we will need the support of a community. We will need the support of one another to find our way.

It's also important to recognize that while individual lifestyle changes are necessary to address the global ecological crisis, they are not sufficient. It will also require dramatic action on the part of governments and corporations, and making that happen involves both public policy advocacy by citizens and corporate engagement by shareholders. I hope we will challenge one another and support one another in taking further steps toward living more sustainably. Every step we take, however small, does make a difference. Thanks be to God. Amen.