**Children’s Climate Fund**

 Laura asked me to use today’s reflection to introduce a Bethel initiative to address climate change.

 I could start by frightening you with the consequences of climate change - droughts, extreme heat waves, hurricanes, food shortages, climate induced migration and mass extinctions. But I think most of you already know all that and scaring people isn’t likely to help. Instead, I want to start by looking at how we find ourselves still unprepared and in varying states of denial over a looming crisis that threatens our children’s future.

What we need to talk about is why we still fail to act after knowing about climate change for decades and seeing it play out in increasingly extreme weather events. Part of the answer is that denial is often easier than facing unpleasant things, especially when we’re not sure we can fix them. And climate change is a really hard problem. To understand how hard a problem it is, I want to bring in a little nerdy math. You can groan, but you knew this was coming. So, let me introduce you to a little game theory.

 How many of you know about the paper “The Tragedy of the Commons”? That paper describes villagers’ making use of a shared commons to graze their cattle. Each year villagers add more cattle until overgrazing imperils the sustainability of the commons. Villagers initially benefits from adding more cattle, but when everyone else adds their cattle, the overgrazed commons can no longer support the number of cattle.

The Tragedy of the Commons is an example of what game theorists call a “prisoner’s dilemma”.  You’ve all seen the aptly named prisoner’s dilemma played out in countless cop shows where the suspects are separated and promised lighter sentences if they implicate their partner. Both suspects would be better off staying silent, but they often end up implicating each other and coming out with longer sentences.  Prisoner’s dilemmas are games where choices that are individually rational, are collectively irrational.

 Game theorists label the choices of adding more cattle or implicating your partner as choosing between defecting and cooperating.  In a prisoner’s dilemma the best outcome is from defecting while others cooperate. The worst outcome is when you cooperate and others defect.

 What is interesting about prisoner’s dilemmas is that you and others are better off defecting regardless of whether others cooperate or defect. Defecting always gives a better outcome regardless of what others do. Because everyone else sees the same outcomes, it is rational for everyone to defect. The result of everyone defecting is that everyone ends up with a poorer outcome than they would have received if everyone cooperated. That’s why we call it a dilemma.

 Climate change is a tragedy of the global commons. Because it is a prisoner’s dilemma, it is among the most difficult problems to solve. To halt climate change, we need hundreds of nations and billions of people to cooperate in reducing their carbon footprint. Taking action on climate change is made even more difficult because the negative impacts of today’s carbon choices extend years into the future.

 Each of us make carbon choices that improve our lives, but cause small injuries to the planet. We buy a bigger home or new car, run our air conditioner, eat a steak dinner or fly off to vacation in faraway places. Taken individually our choices are rational. The enjoyment we derive from our actions outweigh their small costs to the planet. But when similar choices are made by billions of others, those small emissions add up to threaten the sustainability of our planet.

No one wants their children or grandchildren to live in the world science tells us is coming if we fail to act. We all know that we would be better off if everyone made better carbon choices, but absent incentives or regulations forcing those choices most of people will continue to make the same carbon choices they have been making.

 The author of the Tragedy of the Commons suggested that the solution to the dilemma is “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon”.  New regulations on carbon emissions like carbon taxes and limitations on fossil fuels will certainly be needed, but new regulations that must be preceded by “mutual agreement”.

 Economists and game theorists have studied strategies for solving prisoner’s dilemmas where people interact over multiple encounters, but the results are not encouraging. What they fail to take into account is that individuals are embedded in communities that shape their values and choices. Some version of the Golden Rule is embedded in every world religion. Without those socially and religiously driven values, humans would not have evolved from small bands of hunter gathers into today’s nation states.

 There is a new UCC banner outside church today. It proclaims three great loves - Love of Neighbor, Love of Children and Love of Creation. Those are values that we as a church and individuals are called to live into. There is a power that comes from gathering in community to proclaim those values.

In this morning’s reading from Matthew 22 Jesus lays out the Great Commandment to love God with all your being and to love your neighbor as yourself. If Jesus were here today, I think he would echo not just love of neighbor, but love of creation. We cannot truly love the Creator if we fail to love and protect creation.

 Showing love for neighbors, children and creation requires that we make better carbon choices. We can start by reducing, replacing and refining our carbon footprint. After that we can rehabilitate the planet by offsetting our emissions.

 That is where the new Children’s Climate Fund comes in. I know I’m going to continue filling my gas tank and flying back East to visit my grandson. The green Children’s Climate Fund envelopes are a reminder that we can offset the carbon we can’t eliminate. The envelopes contain suggested donations for filling you gas tank or taking a flight. The funds we collect will be used to purchase carbon offsets that are certified to be new permanent reductions. We will also use the fund to buy offsets for the oil we burn heating the church. Because our children will be the ones living with the planet we leave them, we have asked them to select the offsets Bethel will fund.

 The Persian poet Rumi once wrote:

 Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.

 If we want to change the world, be need first to change ourselves. Even small steps like driving less, moving to more plant-based meals and donating to the Children’s Climate Fund move us in the right direction. The more we act, the easier it will be for others to follow. Our individual choices can combine to build the mutual agreement needed for broader action by government.

I hope you will join in supporting the Children’s Climate Fund at whatever level makes sense for you.

 Amen