

A Blessed Way of Life
Luke 6:20-26

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As a professional environmentalist, I need to be careful about how I live. Not only do I have a reputation to maintain, but I really do want to do the right thing for the Earth.

So, a few days ago, I took a little quiz that calculates my "environmental footprint." The version that I took (one of several on the Internet - this one is at <http://www.lead.org/leadnet/footprint>), asked 13 multiple-choice questions. Based on my housing, my transportation, and how I eat, the software calculated how much of the Earth is devoted to meeting my needs.

I felt hopeful as I worked my way through the test.

It asked about food: My family has a semi-vegetarian diet; we don't waste much food, and don't use a lot of processed food.

In terms of transportation, I do rack up quite a few miles of driving a year, but I've got a little car with great gas mileage, and I hardly ever fly.

And we've got a little bitty house, with some high-efficiency appliances.

The web site processed my answers, and told me that my lifestyle has an ecological footprint of 12.4 acres. In a more meaningful figure, it said that my eco-footprint measures 49.4 % of an average American footprint.

Woo-hoo! I'm way greener than the average American! I only use up half as much of the planet as my average neighbor.

Then it threw a question at me that I didn't expect. How much of the biosphere should be set aside for other species?

Well, I was feeling very generous (being the green guy that I am), so I said 25%. Humans will only claim ¼ of the earth for our own use; we can let all the other species have a quarter.

The computer then looked at the total productive space on Earth, how much I was willing to give to the critters, at my low-consumption lifestyle, and told me:

"Your choice means that it requires 3 Earths to support each member of the present human population at your standard of living."

My 12.4 acre footprint is using 3 times what the Earth can provide, if all 6 billion of us were to live like I do. And I'm only using half of what the average American uses.

I have to admit that I have not slept well since I took that test.

While there is a long laundry list of environmental problems ranging from local to global, this is the core one: We are overloading our poor planet.

Now some of you may be suspicious. After all, that 'ecological footprint' test was put out by an environmental advocacy group. They want to paint a terrible picture to help raise money and mobilize the volunteers. It isn't really that bad.

Or is it?

- Just 10 days ago, the Canadian government banned commercial and recreational cod fishing off their Atlantic provinces and Quebec, because of the almost total collapse of those fish stocks.

More broadly, the United Nations reports that over 70% of global fish populations are now overfished or at the brink of being overfished, compared to just 5% reported at that level only 40 years ago.

- We've seen water problems here in the Rocky Mountains with the recent drought – which we all hope is a temporary situation.

But 2 days ago, Interior Secretary Gale Norton released a report predicting permanent water crises across the western US by 2025, as our demand outstrips the available resources.

And experts at a major conference in Kyoto, Japan last month predicted similar problems world-wide.

- Zoologists tell us that the Earth is now undergoing the 6th great extinction in the entire history of the planet. Species are being lost on a scale equal to the die-off of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, the same sort of numbers, and maybe even at a faster rate. Most of those extinctions are coming from habitat loss – they are just squeezed out by human activities. Remember how I was going to give all the other species 1/4 of the planet? Apparently, the current figure is 10-12%.
- Then there is global warming. The climate of our entire planet is being warped – a change driven by our profligate use of fossil fuels (gas, oil, coal) in power plants and for transportation. We're overwhelming the planet's atmosphere. In 1950, global carbon dioxide emissions stood at 1.6 billion tons. In 2000, those emissions approached 6.5 billion tons, a quadrupling in just 50 years.

What on Earth is going on? One important factor is population growth.

In the 10,000 years of humanity's agricultural era, our global population has grown from 6 million to 6 billion. Astoundingly, more than half of that population growth has happened in my lifetime! Not only are the numbers up, but that growing population is, on average, consuming more and more, wasting more and more, travelling more and more. In other words, we are having a larger per-person footprint.

We are demanding more of this planet than it can possibly provide. And our demands just keep on growing. It is happening here in the United States, and our affluent US lifestyle is being adopted all around the globe.

It seems that we've heard a lot about the American Way of Life recently. It is a phrase that has come up frequently in the last year and a half as the US deals with national security questions and war.

The "American way of life" is hard to define. It includes our rich heritage of freedom, of legal and personal rights, flourishing community, and lively democracy. Those values and principles are definitely worth preserving!

But most often, the term refers to our material way of life.

2 years ago this month, the Bush administration presented its Energy Policy to Congress. In what has become a widely-quoted statement, Press Secretary Ari Fleisher spelled out his boss's position:

"The President believes ... that it should be the goal of policy makers to protect the American way of life. The American way of life is a blessed one." "The American way of life is something that needs to be protected as we enjoy our resources and we enjoy the American standard of living."

Well, I just found out that my "enjoyment" of resources and my relatively moderate standard of living takes 3 times what this planet can sustain. So I have to disagree with Mr. Fleisher, and Mr. Bush.

The American way of life is not a blessed one. It is seductive, attractive, comfortable, convenient, even fun. There are lots of adjectives that could be used. But it is not blessed.

Jesus spoke about blessedness.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

The blessed life is one that is sustainable and just. It is not loaded up with possessions, and luxury, and status. The blessed life strives for God's shalom – God's peace, justice and harmony for all of creation.

Now, I admit that Jesus might not have used the word "sustainable." He probably didn't know the word. But he did talk a lot about poverty and wealth, about justice and relationships.

It is clear that the blessings and woes in Luke's version of the beatitudes are not some spiritual metaphor. Jesus really was saying that blessedness hooks onto poverty a lot more easily than it does to wealth.

And so we have dueling notions of blessedness.

- Jesus says that the poor, the hungry, and those who weep are blessed.
- Our leaders – the cultural, business and political leaders of both parties – tell us that those who consume 6 times what the planet can provide, are blessed.

Which version of the blessed life are we going to work for?

- The American way of life – one that is not sustainable, one that will lead to the devastation of much of the life on this planet.
- Or a sustainable way of life – one seeking justice and peace for humanity, and for the rest of creation?

It really is a choice that must be made. Which value system, which vision of hope, are we going to commit ourselves to? Where are we going to stake our future?

You may have noticed that this is not a "feel good" sermon. It doesn't make me feel very good, either.

These truths about our unsustainable lifestyle – some truths that we're just discovering, and other truths that we're just admitting – are painful and difficult.

The scholars who write about environmental ethics have named several norms that we should work toward. One of the principal norms is “sufficiency.” That there should be enough for all – a baseline floor where nobody has to live with too little.

The norm of sufficiency, in a limited world, also says that nobody can have too much. That there is a ceiling of wealth and privilege that no one should be able to go above.

When the average American is consuming at more than 6 times a sustainable level, we, as a people, are way above the ceiling.

A decade ago, the Environment Minister of the Brazilian government put it bluntly:

"If it is impossible to extend the present way of life in the overdeveloped countries to the rest of the planet, then there is something wrong with this way of life."

We are the problem. We have to change. Major cuts are needed.

How do I cut my resource use to 1/3 of what it is now? How does the average American cut to 1/6 of their current resource use?

I don't know. And I confess that I'm not excited about making the sort of changes that will be necessary.

When I took that ecological footprint quiz, it would have been so nice if my lifestyle came in just about at the sustainable level.

Then, I could feel so self-righteous; and I could level scathing words of judgement at those other people who use twice as much, or 4 times as much as I do.

But I'm way over the top, too. And cutting back that far is going to hurt.

This level of over-consumption is not the sort of thing that I can fix by riding my bike to work once a week, and screwing in one more compact florescent light bulb. It will take serious changes at both a personal and a social level.

Yes, there are changes in my personal lifestyle that I need to make -- in the way I eat, and especially in my travel. Two months ago, I flew down to Houston, Texas to lead a 4 hour workshop. That's not responsible.

But moving our society toward a blessed way of life (in Jesus' terms), moving our society toward sustainability, will take more than personal choices. It will take changes in technology, in the way we structure our cities, and in the values and expectations that we hold up for ourselves.

We're not going to get there all in one big jump. But we can see some signs of what it might look like.

What some people are calling "the next industrial revolution" is implementing some dramatic changes in the efficiency and toxic impact of business. There are some significant ways of cleaning up what we're doing without diminishing our quality of life.

Changing some institutional expectations about what is necessary and appropriate can bring big savings. The United Church of Christ is changing the scheduling of our big national convention. General Synod has been an every other year event; now it will be held every fourth year. That change is being done to save money (about a million dollars per Synod – which is very good stewardship of the money that we give to our church), but it will save lots of the Earth's resources, too.

Similarly, for the sake of the planet, let's cut back on the trade shows and the business meetings and the conventions that bring people in from all over the country, to accomplish very little.

A sustainable society will put more people in condominiums, and less on big suburban lots. We'll use mass transit more, and travel less in our cars – and the cars we do have will have to be much more efficient. Our homes will get smaller, instead of bigger. We'll buy less stuff.

If we're going to save this planet, we're going to have to give up some of the things that we've come to enjoy. Things that we've come to see as normal. Things that we've come to believe are our God-given right.

And as we do that, I think we'll also find what Jesus was talking about. That when we have less stuff, that when we're a little bit hungry sometimes, that when we have to make some hard choices, then we really appreciate what we have. And when we have less stuff, we're more inclined to pay attention to relationships – with our families and our neighbors, with the whole community of life, and with God.

And that, indeed, makes for a more blessed life.

South Carolina lawyer Tom Turnipseed made an interesting comment on our way of life. He wrote:

Perhaps the greatest environmental justice issue is inter-generational theft. The Eighth Commandment says, "Thou shalt not steal", but every day we live in an ecologically unsustainable way of life we steal from our children and grandchildren.

Did "God Bless America" to make a more wasteful and extravagant lifestyle a national civic religion and destroy other species at an unprecedented rate, or do we owe our descendants a duty of care? ... When I look into the eyes of my grandchildren I realize that our greatest responsibility is to conserve and preserve our exquisite eco-system for them and generations to come.

That sounds to me like faithful and blessed wisdom.

May we all have the strength and the courage to choose, and to work toward, a genuinely blessed way of life for ourselves, our children, and for all of life.