Subversive Moral-Spiritual Power in Dangerous Times: Roots and Water

Justice Conference of Women Religious—Chicago March 2017

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Evening Presentation

Thank you for the gift of that ritual, for its deep beauty and power!

I feel honored to be with you for this gathering! Some of the wisest, smartest most daring women in my life have been Catholic women religious, and I am delighted to be among you. I feel as though I should be listening to you and learning from you more than speaking to you, but there will be time for that, too.

Systemic change toward justice in the face of today’s confoundingly complex matrix of entangled economic, financial, military, political, and cultural systems!! Whew, you could not have chosen a more daunting challenge! For this challenge—changing systems of injustice so that justice, peace, and Earth’s integrity my flourish—for this challenge:

- Which roots will we water?
- With what water?
- Where do those roots extend?
- And how do we maintain momentum and hope for systemic change, especially in light of a rising authoritarian, irrational administration that is bent on systematic change away from justice, peace, and creation care?

We live in dangerous times. And I do not mean only the dangers posed by the recent election, but also the danger of what happens when good compassionate people who are filled with longing for justice, come to believe on a subtle level that we are powerless to really change the SYSTEMS of exploitation and injustice that weave their tendrils through our lives and that brutalize so many. It is the danger of fleeing from the systemic realities and our complicity in them into the easier terrain of privatized goodness. Of seeking to ease the suffering around us, while avoiding the matrix of its causes.

You, as expressed in your resolution of 2015, are the great antidote to that privatization! You are a people hungry for far deeper faithfulness. You are hungry and collectively equipped to—in your words—“…examine the root causes of injustice and our own complicity ….and to work to effect systemic change […] to use our collective voice, resources, and power in collaboration with others to establish justice which reflects God’s abundant love and desire that
all may have life.” Hear the power and potential in your firm resolution! Challenging systemic injustice is crucial if the church today is to embody God’s love for this beautiful and broken world. Thank you for your commitment in this resolution and the theme of your gathering. In these days together I ask that you consider and rejoice in the subversive moral-spiritual power for social transformation that resides within this commitment!

To do so: tomorrow morning we will first journey briefly into the wasteland of systemic injustice, or in theological terms, systemic evil. Then we will draw upon three roots of moral power, with each root yielding an image that should serve as water for you. And finally, we will look at practical tools for embodying those images in the work of systemic change.

This evening let us prepare ourselves for delving into the horror of systemic injustice by naming the promises in which we live and breathe, and then evoking one tool for systemic change.

**God’s Life-giving Promises:**

It is an astounding moment in history to be people who serve the God revealed in Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Earth itself. We who stake our lives on the promises of this God have been given truths that shake the foundations of the world:

- The first, or beginning point, is God’s love. Nothing is surer, no truth stronger than this breath-taking claim of Christian faith: that God—the Light of life…the creating, liberating, healing, sustaining Source—loves this world and each of us with a love that will neither cease nor diminish, a love more powerful than any other force in heaven or earth.
- And next, this God is at play in the world, breathing life into it. This Spirit is present within, among and beyond us.
- But that is not all. We—human creatures— are created and called to recognize this gracious and indomitable love, receive it, relish it, revel in it, and—most important of all—especially from a Lutheran perspective—to trust it.
- And finally, after receiving and trusting that love—being claimed by it—we are then to embody it in the world by loving neighbors as God loves. We are beckoned to join with God’s Spirit of justice-making Earth-relishing Love in its
steadfast commitment to gain fullness of life for all. We are called to “love as God loves.”

According to widespread understanding of the Christian story, this is the human vocation, our life's work. We are called and given this reason for being. Of this you are well aware.

That Christians are called to love as the bedrock of life is clear. But just what that wild word means—what it means to embody love—in each new time and place is not. What love is and requires is the great moral question permeating Christian history. Two millennia of Christians and the Hebrew people before them have sought to heed this calling: “to love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:5),” and “to love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). “Our responsibility as Christians,” Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, “is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.”

You, in your communities have realized one of the incisive and avidly avoided features of love as a theological and biblical norm. It is this: where injustice causes suffering, to love means seeking to dismantle that injustice. Ah, how the church loves to avoid this life-disrupting call, escaping from it under the comforting cloak of charity alone or privatized virtue. However, love as justice-seeking is integral to your calling!

If we are complicit in unjust systems, if our lives are all bound up in them and dependent on them, and if we dare to recognize this as an act of neighbor-love, then we are in for turmoil almost beyond bearing. I think you know this holy turmoil. I share with you just two voices from my life that have generated such turmoil:

- One is a strawberry picker in Mexico. She spoke with a delegation of U.S. elected officials that I was co-leading on a fact-finding trip to Mexico and Central America. “Our children,” this honest woman declared, “go hungry because this land which should grow corn and beans for them, instead grows strawberries for your tables.

- The second spoke as part of a small World Council of Churches (WCC) team at a United Nations project, gathered around a table to introduce ourselves to one another. When his turn arrived, one man uttered a single sentence in a voice of quiet power: “I am Bishop Bernardino Mandlate, Methodist bishop of
Mozambique, and I am a debt warrior.” Later that week, when asked to address a United Nations meeting concerning the causes of poverty in Africa, Bishop Mandlate identified the external debt as a primary cause. The debt, he declared, is “covered with the blood of African children. African children die so that North American children may overeat.” The Bishop was speaking of the millions of dollars in capital and interest transferred yearly from the world’s poorest nations to foreign banks, governments, and international finance institutions controlled largely by the world’s leading industrialized nations. In Mozambique, as in many other heavily indebted impoverished countries, the enormous cost of debt repayment took money from the people while adding to the wealth of already wealthy countries. Bishop Mandlate’s words ring a note of horror in the heart for those of us whose economies benefit from the capital and interest paid by the world’s poorest nations.

These voices, of course, represent countless others, and propel us into the heart of your topic for this gathering! What are we to do? How are we to live in the context of such injustice? Tomorrow, we will dive into this question. For this evening, I would offer just one tool. I think of it as “critical mystical vision”: Keeping [your] eye on three things at one time. The first is seeing ever more clearly “what is going on” and especially unmasking systemic evil that masquerades as good. This includes the economic policies and practices that link the wealth and consumption of some (including us) to the poverty and oppression of others. One year while teaching at Seattle University, the theme for the year was “if wealth and poverty are connected, how then shall we live?” My response is first we will learn to see those links very clearly. To expose them, demystify them. James Baldwin once said: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Facing social realities entails seeing them. Catholic moral theologian, Daniel Maguire, says it well: The “bane of ethics” is to ignore or “inadequately see reality.” However, you know as well as I that recognizing causal links between our consumption and the systems that enable it on the one hand, and Earth’s demise and profound human suffering on the other can be devastating and hence dangerous (morally disempowering) unless simultaneously we see something else. Seeing “what is,” when the view is of systemic evil, is morally empowering if accompanied by a second and a third form of vision.
The second kind of vision is seeing “what could and should be”—that is, more just and ecologically sound alternatives already in the making. Seeing alternative modes of economic life and movements that are living into them is vital to critical vision. Such movements and groups are erupting around the world! A Chinese proverb cautions, “unless we change direction, we will get where we are going.” Changing direction begs first recognizing, even dimly, alternative viable destinations. These two together—vision of “what is” and of “what could be”—I call critical seeing.

The third mode of vision, I refer to as “mystical vision.” By this I mean acknowledgement of sacred powers at work in the cosmos enabling life and love ultimately to reign over death and destruction. Mystical vision confirms what eco-theologian, Sallie McFague refers to as “our hope against hope that our efforts on behalf of our planet are not ours alone but that the source and power of life in the universe is working in and through us for the well-being of all creation, including our tiny part in it.”

“Critical mystical vision,” then, is a phrase to signify the union of vision in these three forms:

- seeing “what is going on” in whatever situation is at hand, and especially unmasking systemic evil that masquerades as good.
- seeing “what could be,” that is, alternatives.
- seeing ever more fully the sacred Spirit of life coursing throughout creation and leading it—despite all evidence to the contrary—into abundant life for all.

**CLOSING**

Systemic change—as love embodied - has at its heart the crucial task of holding these three in one lens. To let go of one it seems to me, is to invite either powerlessness or despair. Critical mystical vision is subversive because “it keeps the present provisional and refuses to absolutize it.” Vision of this sort reveals a future in the making and breeds hope for moving into it.

Each of these forms of vision is a root—a root of your subversive moral-spiritual power for the work of systemic change in the name of love. It is good that you seek life-liberating roots
and water for them. For our moment in time is pivotal. The generations alive today will determine whether life continues in ways recognizably human on this home we call Earth.

May this extraordinary community—the Justice Conference of Women Religious continue to bring your plentiful gifts to the great moral-spiritual challenge of the 21st century: forging ways of living that Earth can sustain and that build compassion and justice among Earth’s peoples. And may this gathering nurture your power for that holy calling.
Morning Presentation (Second Presentation)

The power and potential in your prophetic resolution of 2016 is great. It is faithful, daring, disruptive, and deeply rooted in the Gospel of God’s life-saving, justice-seeking, Earth-honoring love! Your resolution commits you to confronting and seeking to transform daunting systems that seem overwhelming and which we may feel powerless to change. You are therefore utterly wise to pursue the question that you pursue in this gathering: which roots will we water?! Your question calls forth other questions and it incites us to explore both the roots and the water itself!

In this morning together, let us insist on discovering roots of moral-spiritual power for social transformation toward justice that resides within your resolution. Let us discover also water for keeping that power alive and well.

I will give you nothing you do not already have. Here is the plan for this morning’s comments:

- In Part One we will work to see more clearly the systemic realities with which you are called to grapple.
- In Part Two we will uncover three vital roots of wisdom and moral-spiritual power for systemic change. Each root will yield an image for you to hold. These images are WATER to sustain your moral-spiritual power into the future.
- Part Three will offer a few practical implications of living from these roots and by this water.

But first a reminder of the hope in which we live and breathe. And it is indeed an astounding moment in time to claim the heart of Christian traditions—be they Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox: that the grace of God, made flesh in—but not only in—a dark-skinned Jew on this roving planetary speck called Earth, surpasses every force in heaven or earth. And that this love- for you personally and for Earth’s entire web of life- will not dim in all the ages to come.
Let that promise flood over you, fill every cell of your body, and embrace you: For this we know: “neither death nor life, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.”

This is the bedrock of my words this morning. If anyone comes in late and sits beside you, please communicate that foundation to her or him.

Part One

Knowing this promise to be true, venture with me into terrifying terrain. Dare to step into the reality that I think you have called me here to help you face. It is a reality that haunts me, and that I have learned haunts you: the reality that, though we do not will it, our lives are all wound up in systemic injustice—or systemic evil in theological terms—by virtue of the economic policies, practices, institutions, and assumptions that shape how we live. Before we go there, recall that we will not stay in that stark landscape this morning. It is not the focus of this talk. It is rather the backdrop that you have collectively had the courage to name and face. That in itself is a profoundly faithful and necessary move. One cannot fully discern the Spirit at work in the world to [bring] abundant life for all without daring to face what is going on that gets in the Spirit’s way.

The practices and products of our daily lives have destructive, even deadly impacts on countless impoverished people. Although we do not intend harm, our ways of life are killing people through climate change and through enslaving them in mines or plantations that produce minerals for our household goods, poisoning their water or selling it on the global market, taking their land and homes, obliterating their fish supplies, and more. Moreover, through myriad forms of ecological degradation we are disrupting a fundamental quality of God’s garden—its life-generating capacity. This link between our relative affluence and the poverty of many, I refer to as “economic violence.” The ecological aspects of it—introduced below—constitute “ecological violence.” To repent of structural evil, we must recognize it. Morality and faith in God require recognizing haunting realities such as these named above, and acknowledging our finely-honed propensity to deny them.

To see more clearly the systems of economic violence, consider a few stories from my life. Last night I shared with you the voices of the Mexican strawberry picker and Bishop
Mandate from Mozambique. Sometime ago I was invited to India to work on eco-justice issues with seminary professors and other church leaders. There I encountered a graduate student who came from the part of India in which hundreds of thousands of small scale farmers have been committing suicide. They are killing themselves in response to the insufferable debt they have incurred as a result of large global agribusiness corporations and the way that they have basically forced the farmers into.

My colleagues in India taught me about another set of deeply disturbing connections. It is the link between climate change on the one hand, and social injustice based on race, class, gender, and caste on the other. “Climate change,” declared one Indian church leader, “is caused by the colonization of the atmospheric commons … the powerful nations and the powerful within [them] continue to emit greenhouse gases beyond the capacity of the planet to withstand. However, the communities with almost zero footprint … bear the brunt of the consequences.”

Climate change, I learned, may be the most far reaching manifestation of white privilege and class privilege yet to face humankind. What do I mean? Climate change is caused overwhelmingly by the world’s high-consuming people who are disproportionately descendants of Europe. Yet, climate change is wreaking death and destruction first and foremost on impoverished people who also are disproportionately people of color.¹ To illustrate: Countless reports link climate change to hunger. Oxfam’s “Climate Change vs. Food Security” report declares: “One of climate change’s most savage impacts on humanity” will be increased hunger.² Let it sink in: with global warming, dry places will become dryer and wet places wetter. With drought, if “free market” rules govern food prices, the poorest starve. Add to this the rising seas

¹ For Example: The estimated 600 million environmental refugees whose lands will be lost to rising seas if Antarctica or Greenland melt significantly will be disproportionately people of color, as are the 25 million environmental refugees already suffering the consequences of global warming. So too the people who will go hungry if global warming diminishes crop yields of the world’s food staples—corn, rice, and wheat. The 40% of the world’s population whose lives depend upon water from the seven rivers fed by rapidly diminishing Himalayan glaciers are largely not white people. As recognized in “The Future We Want,” the outcome document of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), climate change “represents the gravest of threats to the survival” of some island nations, some of which could cease to exist as countries as a result of rising sea levels. It goes without saying that these nations are composed of people who are predominantly not white.

that could threaten more than 25% of Africa’s people\(^3\) and drown some island states and low-lying coastal areas. This means hundreds of millions of climate refugees, largely people of color.\(^4,5,6\) Indeed, the now nearly 25 million climate refugees are primarily Asian and African. No less alarming: Desertification, which will strike hard in the Arab world and southern Africa, provokes war. It was a factor in the Darfur conflict.

Within the U.S. too, economically marginalized people—who are also disproportionately people of color—are most vulnerable to on-going suffering from the extreme storms, illness, and food insecurity brought on by climate change. The Oakland Climate Action Coalition warns that 3,000—5,000 “Oakland residents live in areas likely to be flooded with a 1.0 and 1.4 meter rise in sea levels.” Nearly 90 percent live in areas that are low income, non-white or non-English speaking.\(^7\) Environmental racism and white privilege strike again in climate change.

Look…the catalog of climate change damage to the world’s already vulnerable people will blow your mind. Yet the cause of this disaster is the uncontrolled burning of fossil fuels, especially by high consuming societies. And that, dear friends, is us.

Truth-telling reveals the unthinkable, the unbearable: just by housing, feeding, clothing and transporting ourselves, we cut down the life chances of countless neighbors. By doing nothing or little, we actively bring on the catastrophe. Do not think for a moment that people of Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America are not fully aware of the role we play. Many voices of the Global South recognize this as climate debt or climate colonialism.

Enough, enough, enough you cry! As do I. Enough. Say no more, see no more! But truth telling demands digging deeper. That some cause climate change while others suffer most from it


\(^4\) In the Caribbean, too, “sea level rise is a huge concern, endangering the future of small islands, and in the shorter term affecting their trade and tourism capabilities.” Hannah Brock for the Oxford Research Group, “CLIMATE CHANGE: Drivers of Insecurity and the Global South.” 2012

\(^5\) Even the target of 2 degrees Celsius warming, discussed at the recent Summit, may be a death sentence for some island peoples. Yet, warns the World Bank report, “we’re on track for a 4 degree warmer world” which would inundate many coastal areas including parts of California.

\(^6\) As global warming approaches and exceeds 2°C, there is a risk of triggering nonlinear tipping elements. Examples include the disintegration of the West Antarctic ice sheet leading to more rapid sea-level rise, or large-scale Amazon dieback drastically affecting ecosystems, rivers, agriculture, energy production, and livelihoods. This would further add to 21st-century global warming and impact entire continents.

is but the first layer of the travesty. Jesus cries out: “Have you not eyes to see?” A people freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbor is called to see more deeply. The second layer is no less horrific. Climate-privileged societies and sectors—like us—may respond to climate change in ways that protect us from its worst impacts while relegating the most “climate vulnerable” to devastation.\(^8\) The third layer I learned again from India: Measures to reduce carbon emissions designed by privileged sectors may further damage “poor and marginalized communities.”\(^9\) To illustrate, food is lost when crops go for bio-fuel instead of food. In short, the climate crisis reinforces the very forms of injustice that neighbor-love calls us to dismantle.

But wait. Danger lurks. Facing realities such as these breeds despair and powerlessness. To acknowledge the widespread suffering that may be linked to my material abundance would be tormenting. How could I live with the knowledge if I truly took it in? And if I dare to see, then I view also the power and complexity of structural injustice. Where would I find the moral-spiritual power to transgress tidal waves of political and economic force lined up to maintain those complex systems that benefit a few while damaging so many? A sense of inevitability may suck away at hope.

Our task in this gathering however, is not just to name this reality. Our task is to ask in the face of this—in this context—how are we to be agents of God’s justice-making love, not only by binding up the wounds of devastated people, but by confronting and transforming the systems that enable some to flourish while brutalizing others.

**PART TWO: Three deep roots and the images they offer as life-giving water**

It is in this reality that you have dared to name your resolve, your commitment—to embody God’s love in this world by examining the root causes of injustice and then working

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\(^8\) “Climate vulnerable” refers to nations and sectors that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. As defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “vulnerability” refers to “the degree to which a system is susceptible to, or unable to cope with, adverse effects of climate change.” IPCC Working Group 2, *Third Assessment Report, Annex B: Glossary of Terms* (2001), http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/glossary/tar-ipcc-terms-en.pdf. I use “climate privilege” to indicate nations and sectors most able to adapt to or prevent those impacts, or less vulnerable to them.

\(^9\) Soumya Dutta, Soumitra Ghosh, Shankar Gopalakrishnan, C. R. Bijoy, and Hadida Yasmin, *Climate Change and India* (New Delhi: Daanish Books, 2013), 12. This study notes that climate change has “two sets of impacts” on vulnerable sectors. One is the actual impact of climate change. The “second set of impacts originates from actions that our governments and corporate/industrial bodies undertake in the name of mitigating climate change. This includes large-scale agro-fuel and energy plantations in the name of green fuel . . . extremely risky genetically modified plants (in the name of both mitigation and adaptation to climate change), more big dams for ‘carbon-free’ electricity,” and more.
toward systemic change! For moral power toward those ends, we will draw from three ancient roots, learning from each an image that might water you! Water your courage, your hope, and your on-going justice-making.

The first root is a three-millennial old heritage of faithful resistance. We in Christian traditions stand in a long line of courageous resisters who stood up to whatever systems and power demanded them to transgress God’s call to love God and neighbor. A heritage born and given to the world in Judaism, it includes:

- the daring midwives who rescued Moses from the Pharaoh’s deadly hand;
- Jesus and the early martyrs who refused to comply with the imperial demands;
- the abolitionists;
- the “righteous gentiles” who defied Hitler’s death machine;
- the Huguenots in the village of Le Chambon whose quiet resistance saved 4,000 Jews even while occupied by fascist forces;
- It includes the civil rights movement, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Workers movement, and so many more!

What if our worship and art, our sermons and songs taught that this is who we are—descendants of faithful resisters? What if the children in our parishes frequently heard sermons such as that preached by one of my pastors: “I could empathize with Paul in prison,” she declared, “because last time I was in prison, I too was in solitary confinement.” She had been jailed many times for protesting the Trident nuclear submarines stationed near Seattle. What if our communities were morally formed to see themselves as walking in the footsteps of fiercely loving resisters? How we live depends in part on in what story we see ourselves as players. What if the story told—including us as characters in it—truly honored our rich heritage of resistance to dominant powers where they demanded people to transgress God’s commandment to love God and to love neighbor? Telling this story would not be too strange, for that heritage is at the heart of Christian and Hebrew scriptures. This story is one astounding root from which we grow.

Recalling it in worship, education, and daily practices would be water for our power to resist structures of injustice as did our faith forbearers.

The image: You- we- walk in the footsteps of fiercely loving subversive resisters.
The second root is one specific faith ancestor: the second century Irenaeus of Lyon who was incidentally, a leader of a community that was martyred by Rome for their allegiance to God over allegiance to Cesar) Irenaeus translated the Hebrew “Adam” in Genesis creation story, not as “man” or “human” but as “mud creature.” The word, Adam, comes as you may know from Adamah, the word for soil often translated as dust. But for Irenaeus, we are mud creatures, not dust creatures, BECAUSE we are kept ever moist by—in his words—the “dew of the Holy Spirit dispersed through all the Earth.” Our role as mud creatures is to remain moist with this dew so that the two hands of God—word and wisdom, or Christ and Spirit—can mold us and through us all of creation into its destiny of union and communion with God.

In our congregations and communities, we will ask: What practices of liturgy, prayer, eating, transportation, house-hold management, organizing, advocacy, demonstrating, and more will keep us moist and feed our being as God’s beloved mud creatures being watered by dew of the Holy Spirit so that God may continue to mold us in the ways of justice-seeking love.

This brings us to our third image: Pando. Above ground, Pando appears to be a vast grove of individual aspen trees in Utah extending over some 100 acres. But no, these seemingly separate trees, scientist have discovered, are a single organism coming from and connected by a single vast root system. It is the world’s largest known living organism with estimates of age ranging from 2000 to 1 million years.

- “Pando was discovered by a University of Michigan botanist Burton Barnes, who first suspected the extent of the grove and began to speculate about its size, weight, and age.

- Barnes’s research was confirmed by Michael Grant, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado in Boulder. In an effort to give the tree the beginning of a public identity, he suggested the name of “Pando,” Latin for “I spread.”

Now here is what blew my mind when I learned of Pando. The roots of this vast organism—this community of trees erupting form one root system—ferry water and nourishment across the miles to one another. Trees that grow beside a stream will drink water from the stream and send it off through the roots to trees acres away when they are thirsty!
Pando seems to be a friend of Irenaeus! If Irenaeus saw that the dew of the Holy Spirit is dispersed throughout all the Earth, then maybe Pando has something to teach us about how that life-giving dew spreads from one to the other. We ferry it to one another. When one dried up inside and thirsty for hope, we may turn to one another to be watered.

So, we have drawn up on these three roots, each yielding an image to water our moral-spiritual power:

- The heritage of resistance in which we stand as players offers the image of ourselves standing in a long heritage of fiercely faithful resisters;
- A second century faith fore bearer and resister offers the image of ourselves as mud creatures being molded by the two hands of God;
- And finally, the world’s largest and possibly oldest living organism—Pando—teaches the image of ourselves woven into a great and pulsing root system through which spreads the water of life, the water of the Holy Spirit dispersed through all the Earth.

We move now to:

**Part Three: Practical tools for your ministry of systemic change**

What does it mean to live as descendants of faithful resisters who refused to comply with whatever forces demanded or lured them into betraying God’s ways? What does it look like be mud creatures daily moistened by the Spirit so that the God of justice-making love who is luring all of creation toward abundant life for all can mold us in the shape of that love? How might we live as a vast root systems spreading water across the continents and ages, water to bring life in the face of death dealing systems, water to strengthen and enliven the seeds of resistance? What, in other words, are the practical implications of choosing your path of systemic change to address the root causes of injustice?

The path from heartfelt longing for change at the societal level to actually living into it seems to travel through a thick and swirling fog. The complexity and vastness of the possibilities are confounding. Needed are a framework for unraveling what that conversion entails. In my recent book, I have proposed such a framework. I invite you to work with four elements of that
framework. Could see these as four tools for being the mud creature, for being the children of resisters, and for being a subversive root system.

* One is to recognize that not one of us is primarily an I. I am part of a WE.

Whatever I do is part of an infinitely vaster movement—a cloud of witnesses spanning ages and continents, seeking more just and sustainable ways of living on earth. We see that manifest today in the most widespread social movement known to humankind. It is the burgeoning [confirmed] movement for racial justice, the movement to counter advanced global capitalism and the climate change wrought by it. A movement lead by youth, First Nations peoples, religious groups, scientists, and everyday citizens. Your work in this justice conference of women religious is a part of it. You, of course, are far more advanced in this realization than are most people of the western world; you already know the power of community and you have networks.

* A SECOND tool is to practice two complementary streams of action. Gahndi called them two complementary streams in the bow of non-violence. I think of them as resistance and rebuilding. They need each other. Resistance means seeking to undo or stop systems that generate injustice. Rebuilding is creating more just and sustainable alternatives.

A recent debate on my former campus illustrates. Some colleagues says we must get the university to divest from fossil fuel industry; making money through that industry is morally unthinkable. Other colleagues say, “No, that is the wrong approach. We need to spend our time vastly reducing the university’s carbon footprint through energy efficiency, conservation, and using renewables.” I have said: These two moves—divesting in fossil fuels and investing in clean energy—are two sides of the coin toward a climate justice future. They are resistance and rebuilding held together.

Another example is the movement to undo the speculative finance system that has concentrated so much wealth in so few hands. Withdrawing our savings and pension plans and other money from mainline global banks and investment firms is resistance. Putting it in small scale local banks and socially responsible investments is rebuilding.
* A THIRD tool is to recognize the different levels of social life in which change happens and to realize that when you work for change in one of these, you actually are causing change in the others. Let us look at them. They are:

1) Household or individual lifestyle
2) Institutions of civil society (e.g.: congregations, churches, seminaries, universities, etc.)
3) Business ranging from the global corporation to smaller business
4) Public policy or government at all levels
5) Worldview or consciousness

Often my students will say that lifestyle change does not matter. Our gardening or riding bikes instead of cars will not change the world; what we need is change in policy and other social structures. Other students argue the opposite; social structures will not change until people change how they live.

I love to help them realize that lifestyle change and structural change work together, feeding each other, needing each other. Always see your efforts in one of the arenas as also impacting the other arenas. For example, in Seattle, countless people’s decision to bike or bus has had profound impact on city policy which in turn makes it much safer for people to bike. And these changes in lifestyle and public policy make it more possible for institutions—such as universities - to consider divestment from fossil fuel, and the links to on!

A fourth tool in this framework for living love as ecological-economic vocation and resisting structural sin is recognizing the various forms of actions that need and feed each other. I like to think of them as ten fingers on the hands of radical change. If we had more time, I would ask you all to name examples of each! But for now, just raise your hands if you have participated in these forms of action. They include:

- Lifestyle changes;
- Economic advocacy—boycotts, buying fair trade, socially responsible investing;
- Legislative advocacy and electoral advocacy;
- Community organizing campaigns—an example at my former university, Seattle University, was campaigning to ban sale of water bottles;
- Education and consciousness-raising;
- Public witness—demonstrations (Palestinian bishop calls this “evangelical defiance”);
- Economic alternatives—how many have decided to support CSAs or similar programs?
- Direct services to people in need;
- Worship and prayer;
- Theological and biblical reflection;
- AND MORE

In Closing

Your resolution to challenge systemic injustice and seek the justice, peace, and wellbeing of creation for which God hungers, comes at an epic moment in human history. It is a moment in which humankind hovers on a precipice.

- One side is our current path toward almost unimaginable climate disaster, in which those least responsible for climate change suffer first and foremost its deadly consequences, and in which the gap between those who have too much and those with not enough continues to widen.
- The other side however is the potential before us: the vision that we all hold—in varied forms—of a world in which 1) all people have the necessities for life with dignity and 2) Earth’s eco-systems flourish.

A great choice, a “great calling” is before us. It requires radical change on all levels of being.

Where something great is required of humankind, something great is required of its wisdom traditions. The task of religion and other bodies of wisdom in the early 21st century (the end of the petroleum era) is to plumb the depths of our traditions for moral-spiritual power to heed our calling, and bring this wisdom to the table of public discourse. You in this justice conference of women religious are doing precisely that!

In this morning together we have:

- First: delved into the realities of systemic injustice woven into our lives.
- Second: sought guidance from three vital roots of wisdom and moral-spiritual power for systemic change, each root yielding an image for you to hold as a kind of water for lives of justice-seeking.
- Finally we asked: What are practical implications of living out these images? What does living this way LOOK like?

In response, we considered a framework with four sets of tools in the toolkit of change:

1) that we act as part of a cloud of witnesses spanning time and space
2) that resistance and rebuilding strengthen each other.
3) that change takes place on five level of social life, all of which open doors to change at the other levels
4) at least ten forms of action

It is humankind’s blessed calling to live God’s justice-seeking Earth-honoring love into the world.

The Justice Conference of Women Religious and EACH one of you and the communities that you represent are precious and powerful jewels in that calling. You are wise and courageous leaders. In your time together in these days you will grow in power for embodying your resolution. In this you are growing also in capacity to collaborate with one another, and to bear the splendid fruit of social justice and life abundant for this beautiful and broken community of life that we call Earth.

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