

A Lesson from the Gulf Oil Spill: We Are All Connected

Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church
May 26, 2010

The original peoples of the North American continent understand that we are all connected, and that harm to one part of the sacred circle of life harms the whole. Scientists, both the ecological and physical sorts, know the same reality, expressed in different terms. The Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) also charge human beings with care for the whole of creation, because it is God's good gift to humanity. Another way of saying this is that we are all connected and there is no escape; our common future depends on how we care for the rest of the natural world, not just the square feet of soil we may call "our own." We breathe the same air, our food comes from the same ground and seas, and the water we have to share cycles through the same airshed, watershed, and terra firma.

The still-unfolding disaster in the Gulf of Mexico is good evidence of the interconnectedness of the whole. It has its origins in this nation's addiction to oil, uninhibited growth, and consumerism, as well as old-fashioned greed and what my tradition calls hubris and idolatry. Our collective sins are being visited on those who have had little or no part in them: birds, marine mammals, the tiny plants and animals that constitute the base of the vast food chain in the Gulf, and on which a major part of the seafood production of the United States depends. Our sins are being visited on the fishers of southern Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, who seek to feed their families with the proceeds of what they catch each day. Our sins will expose New Orleans and other coastal cities to the increased likelihood of devastating floods, as the marshes that constitute the shrinking margin of storm protection continue to disappear, fouled and killed by oil.

The oil that continues to vent from the sea floor has spread through hundreds of cubic miles of ocean, poisoning creatures of all sizes and forms, from birds, turtles, and whales to the shrimp, fish, oysters, and crabs that human beings so value, and the plankton, whose life supports the whole biological system -- the very kind of creatures whose dead and decomposed tissues began the process of producing that oil so many millions of years ago.

We know, at least intellectually, that that oil is a limited resource, yet we continue to extract and use it at increasing rates and with apparently decreasing care. The great scandal of this disaster is the one related to all kinds of "commons," resources held by the whole community. Like tropical forests in Madagascar and Brazil, and the gold and silver deposits of the American West, "commons" have in human history too often been greedily exploited by a few, with the aftermath left for others to deal with, or suffer with.

Yet the reality is that this disaster just may show us as a nation how interconnected we really are. The waste of this oil -- both its unusability and the mess it is making -- will be visited on all of us, for years and even generations to come. The hydrocarbons in those coastal marshes and at the

base of the food chain leading to marketable seafood resources will taint us all, eventually. That oil is already frightening away vacationers who form the economic base for countless coastal communities, whose livelihoods have something to do with the economic health of this nation. The workers in those communities, even when they have employment, are some of the poorest among us. That oil will move beyond the immediate environs of a broken wellhead, spreading around the coasts of Florida and northward along the east coast of the U.S. That oil will foul the coastal marshes that also constitute a major nursery for coastal fauna, again a vital part of the food chain. That oil will further stress and poison the coral reefs of Florida, already much endangered from warming and ocean acidification. Those reefs have historically provided significant storm protection to the coastal communities behind them.

The dispersants that are being so wantonly deployed will have consequences we're not yet cognizant of, and the experience of gold and silver mining in the West is instructive. The methods used in those old mining operations liberated plenty of arsenic, mercury, other heavy metals, left cyanide and acids, all of which have significant health effects on those who live in the immediate area of mines and tailings, as well as those who use water downstream and breathe downwind air.

There is no place to go "away" from these consequences; there is no ultimate escape on this planet. The effects at a distance may seem minor or tolerable, but the cumulative effect is not. We are all connected, we will all suffer the consequences of this tragic disaster in the Gulf, and we must wake up and put a stop to the kind of robber baron behavior we supposedly regulated out of existence a hundred years ago. Our lives, and the liveliness of the entire planet, depend on it.