

Climate Change Refugees...For the Sake of the Objective

Psalm 142

September 11, 2016

Even while I dreamed I prayed that what I saw was only fear
and no foretelling,
for I saw the last known landscape destroyed for the sake
of the objective, the soil bulldozed, the rock blasted.
Those who had wanted to go home would never get there
now.

I visited the offices where for the sake of the objective the
planners planned
at blank desks set in rows. I visited the loud factories
where the machines were made that would drive ever
forward
toward the objective. I saw the forest reduced to stumps and
gullies; I saw
the poisoned river, the mountain cast into the valley;
I came to the city nobody recognized because it looked
like every other city.
I saw the passages worn by the unnumbered
footfalls of those whose eyes were fixed upon the objective.

Their passage had obliterated the graves and the
monuments
of those who had died in pursuit of the objective
and who had long ago forever been forgotten, according
to the invariable rule that those who have forgotten forget
that they have forgotten. Men and women and children now
pursued the objective
as if nobody ever had pursued it before.

The races and the sexes now intermingled perfectly in
pursuit of the objective.
The once-enslaved, the once oppressed were now free
to sell themselves to the highest bidder
and to enter the best-paying prisons
in pursuit of the objective, which was the destruction of all
enemies,
which was the destruction of all obstacles, which was to clear
the way
to victory which was to clear the way to promotion, to
salvation, to progress,
to the completed sale, to the signature
on the contract, which was to clear the way

to self-realization, to self-creation, from which nobody who
ever wanted to go home
would ever get there now, for every remembered place
had been displaced; the signposts had been bent to the
ground and covered over.

Every place had been displaced, every love
unloved, every vow unsworn, every work unmeant
to make way for the passage of the crowd
of the individuated, the autonomous. the self-actuated,
the homeless
with their many eyes opened only toward the objective
which they did not yet perceive in the far distance,
having never known where they were going,
having never known where they came from.

Wendell Berry, Sabbath Poem II, 1997

The objective. What a brilliantly insightful image.

What is the objective?

Whatever it is, the objective is exceedingly powerful. So powerful it hypnotizes people. It defines their desire: people desire the objective. People organize their lives around pursuing the objective.

The objective manifests as countless personal objectives—the promotion, the sale, the signature on the contract, self-realization, the destruction of all enemies. Each personal objective feeds into *the objective*.

In pursuit of the objective, people cut down forests, poison rivers, destroy mountains and mass produce mass consumption cities.

In pursuit of the objective, people dutifully conform to promoting their individuality.

In pursuit of the objective, people don't forget their ancestors, they forget they have ancestors. They forget they are ancestors. And what is forgotten cannot be remembered.

In pursuit of the objective, people destroy the earth. And what is destroyed cannot be recreated.

In pursuit of the objective, people lose their humanity. And what is lost cannot be found.

The objective.

I wonder, is it in pursuing the objective that people forget, destroy and lose? Or is *that* the objective—that people forget, destroy and lose?

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature recently published a report on our planet's oceans. Eighty scientists from around the globe participated in the research. According to the report, the oceans are now filled with climate change refugees. The scientists don't call them climate change refugees, but I do.

By burning fossil fuels and releasing heat-trapping CO₂ into the atmosphere, we're heating up the oceans. That's because the oceans absorb most of the heat that we generate—90%. That's a significant amount. If that heat had stayed in the atmosphere rather than being

absorbed by the oceans, the surface of the earth would've warmed by 36C in the past century. Because the oceans have absorbed most of the heat we've generated, the surface of the planet warmed only 1C.

Only 1C I say facetiously. That number too is significant. It's alarming.

Since the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, world leaders and organizations addressing climate change have said we cannot exceed a 2C temperature rise if we want to avoid catastrophic damage and suffering to humans and all other species on planet earth. We're halfway there. But a number of scientists believe even a 2C increase is too high; they set the number at 1.5C. Right now, we're on track to hit somewhere between 3C and 4C. In other words, catastrophic damage and suffering to humans and all other species on planet earth.

By heating up the oceans, we're forcing living creatures who call the seas their home to migrate from their underwater habitats because the water is too warm, or too acidic, or there's no longer food for them to eat, or another refugee species is invading their space and eating them.

A mass migration of sea life. Underwater climate change refugees. With all the havoc, suffering and death that often accompanies mass migrations; 550 types of fish and invertebrates are threatened with extinction.

Now you may not think of an underwater life form, like a fish or a sea turtle, to be a climate change refugee. But why not? Why do we reserve that designation exclusively for members of our own species? Why do we exclude other species? Why can't we acknowledge that fish forced to migrate because of climate change are climate change refugees? That any mammal, reptile or bird forced to migrate because of climate change is a climate change refugee?

All over the planet right now, we're forcing fish, mammals, reptiles and birds to migrate because of the heat that we're generating. Because of human-caused climate change. With all the havoc, suffering and death that often accompanies mass migrations; over 16 million species are known to be threatened with extinction.

All for the sake of the objective.

If these are the effects that warming oceans are having on sea life, what effects will they likely have on human life?

Billions of people on earth rely heavily on food that comes from the sea. Some scientists project that the amount of food people can harvest from the sea in areas like Southeast Asia will drop by one-third by 2050, as the human population continues to increase. Warmer waters may contribute to an increase in vibrio bacterial disease which can cause cholera, and harmful algae blooms that can cause food poisoning. Warmer waters also produce more numerous, more severe and more destructive hurricanes. Then of course, there's sea level rise, which could displace millions of people.

Dan Loffoley, one of the IUCN report's lead authors, remarked in an article in *The Guardian*, "The overall outlook is pretty gloomy...We are locking ourselves into a future where a lot of the poorer people in the world will miss out."

That's an interesting phrase: "...a future where a lot of the poorer people in the world will miss out." In other words and more bluntly, a lot of the world's poorer people have no future. A gloomy prospect, indeed.

Just as climate change refugees are on the move in the earth's seas today, more human climate change refugees will be on the move around the globe in the not-too-distant future.

It's likely that sea-level rise alone will displace hundreds of thousands of people from small island nations, and millions from Bangladesh, Egypt, and every other nation on earth with sizeable populations hugging low coasts.

Then there's Africa, which will likely suffer a different fate—increased drought, food scarcity, and the disappearance of drinking water that will displace millions.

Some climate scientists predict that Mexico and Central America will suffer a debilitating drought that will make parts of those countries uninhabitable.

Many of these people from Bangladesh, Africa, Mexico and Central America are the world's poorer people. Where on earth will these poor people go?

The United Nations Refugee Agency reports that there were 63.5 million displaced people in the world in 2015, a record high; that's one out of every 113 people on earth. The International Organization for Migration estimates that by itself, climate change could create an additional 25 million to 1 billion displaced people by 2050; 200 million is the number most often cited.

Where on earth will these poor people go?

Just look at the current refugee crisis in Europe to get a glimpse of what a future refugee crisis might look like. Look at what's happening in Calais, France, the Mediterranean Sea and Greece. A gloomy prospect, indeed.

Look at my right hand and see—there is no one who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for me.

Psalm 142: 4

..for I saw the last known landscape destroyed for the sake of the objective, the soil bulldozed, the rock blasted.

Those who had wanted to go home would never get their now.

Wendell Berry

The objective. For the sake of the objective.

Whatever the objective is, it's unholy. Forgetting who we are, where we came from, and who will follow us. Destroying the earth, destroying life. Losing our humanity. The objective is unholy.

Whatever the objective is, it contradicts what Jesus Christ called the kingdom of God. The objective is everything the kingdom of God isn't. The kingdom of God is human life, and therefore the planet, liberated from the objective.

In the Bible, Egypt represents the objective, and the Promised Land represents humanity liberated from the objective. Rome represents the objective, and the New Jerusalem represents humanity liberated from the objective. The cross represents the objective, and the resurrected Christ represents humanity liberated from the objective. What Jesus Christ revealed as the kingdom of God is humanity liberated from the objective.

The kingdom of God is about creating a safer, more harmonious home on earth for all living creatures who live here. The kingdom of God is about creating a more holy communion between all living creatures who live here. We'll never be totally safe, completely harmonious. But we can aspire, organize our lives, and work together to create a safer, more harmonious earth. Instead, humanity is creating an increasingly less safe, less harmonious earth for all who live here.

The objective. Forgetting, destroying, losing. Unholy disunion. We're seeing this play

out all around the world right now, in the sea, on the land and in the sky.

Jesus Christ calls on all who seek to embody and enact the kingdom of God to expose the objective. Reject the objective. Contradict the objective. Resist the objective. Create alternatives to the objective. Care for the victims of the objective. And seek to liberate themselves, and all others, from the objective.

That's the ministry of Jesus Christ right there. That's the ministry of the church right there.

This is as good a time as any to pull out my favorite Karl Barth quote: "The Church exists to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the world's own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise."

Or, the church exists to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the objective and which contradicts the objective in a way which is full of promise.

That's our ministry, right here. Let us be that sign. Radically dissimilar to the objective. Contradicting the objective in ways full of promise.