

PLASTIC JESUS – Real faith in a synthetic world

In Paul's letter to the Philippians 4:11-13 we read:

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

First created in 1907, synthetic plastic began being produced on a global scale in the 1950's. Over the next 70 years, annual production of plastics increased nearly 230-fold to 460 million tons by 2019.

Single-use plastics have become one of the most urgent environmental threats. These are too often buried in landfills or dumped untreated in our precious water sources. Even the manufacturing process itself has been identified as a major source of climate-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

As people of faith, we are not exempt from the overuse of plastics. Communion cups, nativity scenes and Easter eggs are just a few of the Christian staples that contribute to our single-use plastics issue. Bleyer Industries was once the only American manufacturer of plastic eggs, and at its height in the early 2000s, it was making 250 million eggs a year. It has since gone bankrupt because it could not compete with the cheaper plastic eggs coming out of China.

Plastic pollution damages habitats and interrupts natural processes, reducing the ability of ecosystems to adapt to climate change, directly affecting millions of people's livelihoods, food production capabilities and social well-being.

Our waterways bear the brunt of this pollution, which interferes with navigation and disrupts commercial and recreational fishing. Ocean wildlife, including birds, whales, fish and turtles, can easily mistake plastic waste for prey, resulting in consumption of plastic that can't be digested, which leads to starvation and eventually death. Infections, reduced ability to swim and internal injuries are also the result of this consumption of plastic.

There has been talk on the news lately about microplastics posing a risk to human health. Increasingly we are seeing these particles, defined as any plastics under 5 millimeters in length, end up not just in the ocean and other water sources but also on farmland, raising concerns over our food supply and our well-being. Some studies estimate that the total mass of microplastic particles consumed by adults corresponds to 50 plastic bags per year or one credit card per week. The chemicals in these plastics have been linked to a variety of issues, including reproductive harm and obesity, organ problems, and developmental delays in children. Ingesting these plastics causes cell damage, which would lead to inflammation and allergic reactions, and once consumed, removing microplastics from your body is not an easy process. These health impacts are felt disproportionately by people of color and low-income communities, where exposure rates tend to be high at each phase of the plastic life cycle.

While recycling has become the easy way to get on board with care of our shared home, recycling without looking at production and habits simply isn't enough.

Cigarette butts (whose filters contain tiny plastic fibers), food wrappers, plastic bottles, plastic bottle caps, plastic grocery bags, plastic straws and plastic stirrers are among the most common pollutants.

These plastics can take anywhere from 20 to 500 years to decompose, depending on the material's structure and environmental factors such as sunlight exposure.

Less than 14% of plastic packaging is recycled. With plastics being composed of several different polymer types, it is nearly impossible to recycle different plastics together as they melt at different temperatures. Additionally, to be recycled properly, plastics need to be separated. This is not only time consuming, but costly.

While our plastic situation seems overwhelming, our faith traditions give us resources to face this issue and change course. How strange to think that

something as common to our world as plastic would be completely alien to our fore parents in faith. It is a reminder that we in the present-day western world have more distance from the world of the Bible than any other culture in history – not just in terms of time, but also in terms of technology, attitudes and disconnection from the non-human world around us.

Justice for creation requires a rethinking of our relationship to plastics. Is it enough that we recycle and find alternatives to single-use items to reduce the amount of plastic that ends up in landfills? How do we account for the fact that plastics are often produced in historically oppressed communities? Do we even have the means to remove enough plastic from our rivers, lakes and the ocean to preserve the bioregions made vulnerable by plastic waste? How do we address plastic's impact on our health and the health of the living things around us?

If the Bible doesn't speak of plastic, how should we people of faith do so? While plastic itself isn't spoken of, the human conditions that have led to our current plastic crisis are woven throughout Scripture. To speak theologically about plastic then is to speak of the human journey of sin, repentance and redemption.

A conversation on plastic has to begin with an understanding of sin. So often we think of sin as the individual acts of harm that are committed between individuals. And while this is true, we can't stop there. Sin is also the harm that communities and societies do to other communities and the vulnerable within their own community and to vulnerable ecosystems. Lack of intent does not equate to lack of harm. That we don't intend to pollute fragile ecosystems and neighborhoods does not absolve us from culpability in the damage that our oversized demand for plastics creates.

It's easy to see that part of what drives our plastic crisis is the idolatrous desire for stuff. From gadgets to furnishings to transportation, we have made the desire to acquire consumer goods an obsession of our culture. This market-driven obsession has led to dissatisfaction with anything other than the newest and best. Planned obsolescence is taken for granted as the price of doing business.

In our Scripture reading today, Paul has learned through all of his trials and tribulations how to be content. It is widely believed that Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians in prison, chained to a guard and awaiting his execution. It is in this context that he wrote.; “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” This requires that we find new definitions of “enough”. It requires that we find our contentment somewhere other than in things. We’ll not find contentment within the bounds of an economy that consistently tells us to buy newer, bigger and better. We need to move from consumption to connections with people, creation, and God in our own lives, and in our economy, we need to stop putting profits over people and planet. The promise repeated throughout the Gospels, for Christ followers is that of eternal life. We may argue over interpretations of what exactly that eternal life looks like, but we take comfort in the belief that some part of us is preserved in the loving embrace of the Divine far beyond the bonds of our mortal existence.

Less comforting is the fact that plastic has an eternal life of its own. It’s estimated that it will take a plastic bag up to 1,000 years to break down once it is in a landfill and even once it has done so, it lives on as microplastics that get into water, soil and the bodies of living creatures. Our plastic use today then becomes a legacy, a curse that gets passed down from generation to generation. Consider then the call to love our neighbor is not simply to our neighbors in space or proximity, but also our neighbors in time. We burden our future neighbors with our plastic usage today, leaving them to solve problems that may have been avoidable.

“I came that you may have life and have it abundantly.” Jesus tells his followers. Unfortunately, we seem to have confused ‘abundance’ with ‘excess’ and nowhere is that more obvious than in the ways we produce, use and discard plastics. The pervasiveness of single-use plastics has trained us to believe that the things around us are disposable and not to be cherished or preserved. The use of plastics to make things more portable, convenient and comfortable obscures the ways in which those same plastics have made the world less inhabitable. Should our abundance lead to waters that are impossible for fish and dolphins to safely navigate? Do the plastics we create give us a better appreciation for the abundance that exists in God’s creation, or do they feed into the compulsion for more, bigger and better?

We know there is much to be thankful for, even in our plastic crisis. We acknowledge that plastic is a useful resource when used appropriately, as in many life-saving medical applications. We can also give thanks for the many people leading the way in tackling the misuse of plastic and uniting to take action to be good stewards of our Earth.

Are there personal actions you can take that reduce using plastics? Such as using metal straw, reusable bags at the grocery store or an unusual idea – take your own dish to the restaurant, if you know there might be a need for a to-go-box.

I can hardly believe I am saying this, but at community meals paper or bamboo plates are more acceptable than plastic or plastic foam. I do have to say though, that I still advocate for using items that do not end up in a landfill.

If you are interested in learning more about the Presbyterian Women's Eco-Justice Initiative – **Break Free From Plastic** – please take home and read the insert in the bulletin. It has suggestions for things that be easily done at home or in the community beyond what you may already be doing. Thank you