

Good evening! My name is Karen Quinlan, and I serve the James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation. I want to thank the organizers of this event, and express my gratitude for your invitation to people of many faiths. I think the only way out of the mess we humans have created for ourselves and our planet is for us to learn to hope together, and then to act together.

I've been asked to make some brief remarks about what Pope Francis refers to as the throwaway culture. Before I answered the call to ministry, I trained and worked as an ecologist. And so this issue of climate change and environmental justice, for me, sits at the intersection of science and spirit.

So I'm going to start with a scientific theory – the idea of convergent evolution. You may not accept the theory of evolution as a way to explain the diversity of life on our Earth, but I ask you to suspend your disbelief for the sake of the metaphor I'm about to offer. Convergent evolution is a way to explain why beings living in different habitats can sometimes look and function very like each other. For example, bats, birds, and butterflies all have wings. Convergent evolution says that wings developed in each of these creatures as flight became important to their survival in their different habitats.

This is a way we can talk about how the throwaway culture developed. Yes, there's corporate greed, and there's the capitalist system, and there's the intentional wearing down of our self-esteem so we'll buy stuff. And as these habitats developed over time, we consumers developed the habits of being able to buy whatever we needed, and throw away whatever we didn't.

The habits we've co-developed with the consumerist culture have led to an even more insidious problem. We've so internalized the habit of being able to throw away that which isn't useful, that we've become dismissive of anything that doesn't serve our individual needs. Including our Earth home, and some of her inhabitants – non-human and human.

I believe we can kick that habit by developing other habits, habits that support a culture of encounter and relationship. Faith can help us with this.

Pope Francis calls us to awe and wonder at the creation, which he makes sure to point out includes us. We humans are not separate from nature, say both the Pope and my ecological understanding of the creation. We are part of. Experiencing this awe and wonder at everything in the creation has to start with seeing its other parts, and knowing them as amazing and wondrous and holy. Because, you know, just as there are very physical exchanges of oxygen

and carbon dioxide and water and nutrients connecting each of us to each other and everything around us, there is a little bit of the holy there too, connecting us in love and in faith.

Connecting to that sense of the holy in all can give us access to the struggles of our human siblings as our Earth home changes, in a spirit-filled way. It can keep us from seeing them as “other” – as not us or not like us – and make it harder for us to let them be tossed aside. The lives of the people living on shrinking islands due to rising seas due to climate change due to our consumer-based habits and lives – those lives are holy and do not deserve to be thrown away. The lives of our siblings of color, and of our siblings in poverty, who are, at best, often spent in unhealthy living environments, among toxins needed to create the stuff some of us want or even think we need. At worst, those lives are treated as expendable – they are they are moved into jails and prisons at wildly disproportionate rates as they respond to the desperation in which they live, or they are taken by violence. These lives, too, are holy, and do not deserve to be thrown away.

May we learn to see the holy in all of us, and in seeing, be moved to treat all as holy.