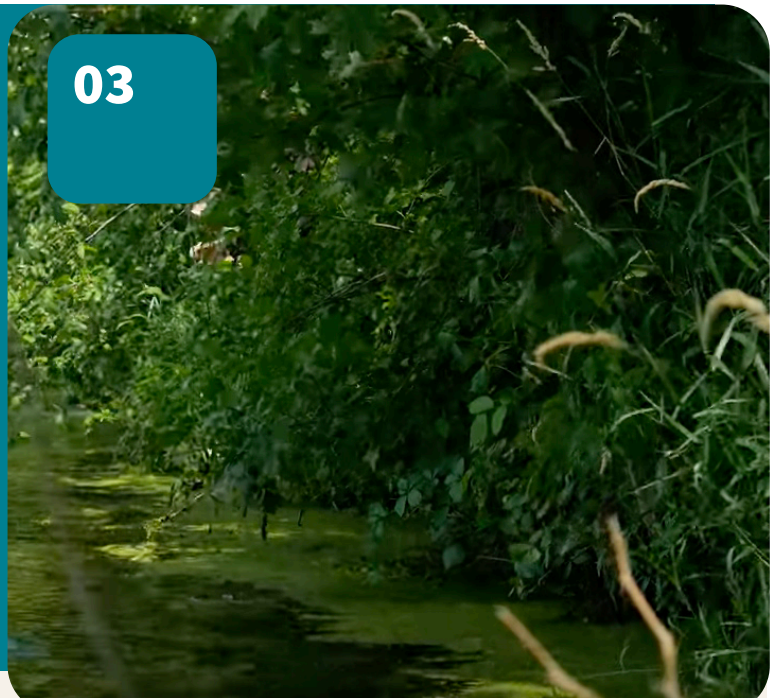


Caring for Climate

Moving from Anxiety to Action

Dealing with our crap! Understanding Environmental Racism and Climate Justice through the Toilet

03



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Purpose

Understand how one of the most mundane of our actions, excreting poop and pee, is related to the questions of global climate catastrophe.

Objectives

- Get a bit more comfortable talking about what we “produce” as humans, not only what we consume. In a phrase, break the taboo about poop!
- Increase awareness about the global sanitation crisis and need for defecatory justice, through the lens of the situation in rural Alabama.
- Begin to consider ecological sanitation alternatives to freshwater flushing toilets.
- Think about translating the golden rule onto our water systems, and “do unto those downstream as we’d hav those upstream do to us.”

Reflecting on our experience

There is a taboo in western culture about speaking about poop.

Discuss your own experience of talking about poop:

How often do you talk about poop?

- Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Less? Invite a show of hands.
- Why do you think that is so? Give people a few moments to think and then invite responses. These are some examples to spur their thoughts:
 - Too important not to talk about it
 - I’m a doctor!
 - Too personal

- Don’t see what it has to do with the other issues I care about
- I’m embarrassed
- I never want to think again about (remember) the outhouse I grew up with
- If someone else brings it up, I will happily engage in the conversation
- I would, but am nervous about what others would think of me if I did!
- I’m a new parent so it’s part of life!
- Other

Why is there a taboo? (Name these if participants do not name them in their responses)

- European Christian development of anti-body theology; do not speak about what is shameful.
- Puritanical cultural norms discourage frank conversation about our anatomy, experiences of our bodies, and engender silence in any context outside the medical.
- Our actions are separated from us (those with freshwater flush toilets) by the technology we use to deal with them.
- People prefer to use petroleum-based fertilizers rather than humanure for fertilizer (though many use the manure of other animals)

“We must develop discipleship practices that make the connections between our individual body, our social body, and our ecological body. Otherwise, I think we’re missing part of the message of Christ. Humans that live disproportionately large compared to their ecosystem are not acting as an accountable part of the body. My work in sanitation helps us think about translating the “golden rule” to our water system. Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do to you.”

Concluding thought to this section:

The impact that this taboo has on addressing the sanitation crisis is severe. We can’t solve what we can’t talk about. Clean water is great to have, but it will only stay clean as long as it does not have pathogens from feces or leftover nutrients from urine in it. It is crucial that we speak about the resources we are discarding from our bodies as just that, discarded resources, and not as waste. There is no waste in nature. As animals, urine and feces are good parts of ourselves given to us by God to assist in the replenishment of soil. If urine and feces are safely reintegrated within the natural cycle of creation, this glorifies our Creator. Currently the global aspiration is a freshwater flush toilet, and excreta from in this system gets wasted as it is often combined with chemicals, processed and then incinerated, pushed downstream, or made into sludge. As freshwater becomes increasingly scarce, there will be less to poop in. We will need to make a shift [in how we shit]. How might ecological sanitation alternatives assist us in daily deepening our discipleship of the Incarnate One, and help us to embrace the shift?

Video

[URL for video](#) [Read or summarize the essay](#)
Watch the 10:16 video or read the transcript



Hello, I am Sarah Nahar. I was born here in the Great Lakes watershed of Turtle Island, the descendent of willing and unwilling settlers. What I mean by that is I am ethnically mixed between those Europeans who were given privilege when they arrived to North America and those West Africans who were not, and did not come here by their own volition...yet are also not indigenous to this place. So I offer these thoughts with humility and deference to people native to this land mass.

I hope this session will assist you in being proactive in advocating for, and being part of, climate solutions. In order to do this, it is important to be led by those most impacted by the ongoing climate crisis. On Turtle Island those most impacted by climate change are groups also impacted by the systemic forces of racism, colonization, corporate capitalism and militarism. Stated more frankly, they are indigenous people everywhere, both across the Global South and those displaced into the Global North, and those whose societies have been disrupted by industrialized war and resource extraction.

Impacted people are speaking out – there are newsletters, press conferences, calls to action, and much more regarding their concerns for biodiversity, for an end to war, and for land sovereignty. Furthermore, impacted groups often approach climate change issues via public health concerns because the lack of health in a community can come from an environment destroyed by colonization. I am going to focus on a public health aspect that affects every one of us, but is not always talked about because it's not considered polite. I'm going to talk about poop and pee—urine and feces—we need to talk about our crap in order to do climate justice work.

With so many issues demanding our attention these days, what is significant about sanitation and why should it stir our hearts? Well, forty percent of the world's population does not have access to dignified sanitation. Like lack of access to potable water, the inability to have a safe, clean place to eliminate has a huge impact on how people—especially women—must structure their day. Unprocessed poop carries deadly bacteria. The number of people who die annually from poor sanitation annually exceeds that of those killed in war, bombings, and natural disasters combined.

The area of sanitation is where I believe that the violence of the interlocking systems of oppression is unseen and

routine. For example, the African-American community living near Mobile, Alabama has had raw sewage running in their yards for decades. They have called, over and over, to the state to pay attention to the fact that normal sewage and septic systems do not work in their environment, and to install systems that do work, conserve water, and reintegrate refuse effectively. The responsible state associations of Alabama, formed during segregation, have been slow to respond, and at times denying there are any issues. The community and their allies collected medical data as many in the community were reported to have hookworm—a major public health concern. Supposedly eradicated last century, hookworm only can resurface in people if the drinking water has been contaminated by feces. Instead of an environmental response that recognizes how racism and classism has sidelined these communities, the state health association and municipality has saddled the rural communities with fees for not having the proper equipment to treat their sewage. Here is an example of how racial and class discrimination is playing a role in the state's lack of responsiveness, which blocks a community's desire to protect themselves from waterborne illness and their natural environment from spreading toxicity. You can learn more by reading Catherine Coleman Flowers' book, *Waste: America's dirty secret*.

So as you think about climate change and the catastrophes it brings, consider how it is already impacting people who are more vulnerable than you. Beyond Alabama, there have been struggles over the placement of sewage facilities in the US. So many of them have been placed in areas where people of color live, and far away from where white people live. The US system of seeing our African American, Latino, South/Southeast Asian, and indigenous communities as disposable allows policies to go through that put our disposables—both poop and chemicals—right in their backyard. This results, among other things, in greater rates of asthma and cancer, as particulates in the air lower its quality. The fact that those who are least responsible for the massive-scale climate change we face will be the most impacted is what the United Nations calls the Protection Gap.

Video

As you process your emotions around climate change, it can be a lot to think about. I'd invite you to use the moment you are on the toilet to think about it. The toilet is a place where our mundane actions contribute to the crisis—yet there is not currently a simple way to stop our contributions. The toilet is the household appliance that consumes the most water. Perhaps practice mellow yellow, brown down. Break the taboo of talking about toilet practices. When you visit the houses of others, ask them what their toilet protocol is, rather than just assuming that you should flush so much freshwater down after every use.

Once you get off the toilet, ask “where are my poop and pee going?” If you don't know, get together with a few others and ask your local officials how they are handling this messy question. Are your nutrients poisoning a river or are they being reintegrated into soil to grow orchard fruits? for example.

Because the flush toilet with sewer piping is so good at its work of separating us from pathogens, some who want to solve this crisis talk about providing flush toilets for all. Dignified sanitation is indeed essential for a healthy life, however holding up the European-style fresh water system as the savior is not the solution. That system is already barely sustainable in the global north, and exporting it all around the world is not actually realistic. It relies on immense physical infrastructure and abundant water, and this is a backwards-looking solution. People like SOIL Haiti, MoSan Guatemala, and Sanergy Kenya, are forward-looking leaders in waterless

toilet technology that provides jobs, breaks taboos, and creates public health. Funding these organizations and learning from them are ways to participate in environmental regeneration efforts that are led by the most impacted. As they are led by people on the margins, the solutions they come up with will help close the Protection gap.

Beyond toilets, integrating anti-racist action and decolonial analysis throughout any sustainability work will allow for climate justice solutions to emerge. This means finding solutions that work for everyone, not just those on the comfortable side of the protection gap.

Christian discipleship is about dealing with our crap, metaphorically anyway, and not pushing it on to someone else, so Christians have the discipleship opportunity to be leaders in this regard, dealing with our crap literally. We can support efforts to make sure everyone has dignified sanitation and systems that work in their environment, and adjust our society's reliance on freshwater flushing. As we transition to systems that safely reintegrate what comes out of our bodies into the soil, we can translate the golden rule onto our water systems, doing unto those downstream as we'd have those upstream do to us.

Biblical Theme:

1 Corinthians 12: 12-26



Here in the flushed and plumbed world, you poop and it goes away...Where is "away?" There is no place called "away." Somewhere receives our refuse. Because the earth is one whole body. But you'd be fooled living in most of the US. Our city architecture is designed to facilitate separation from the extreme consequences of our mundane actions with the press of a button or a jiggle of a handle. But as there is no "away," and as people committed to the diligent study of our interconnectedness, we must care about the place that is "away" and the people (and the fish! and the plants!) who live there.

Though the mission for dignified, ecological sanitation for all is precarious and faces many obstacles—mostly people being resistant to change and addicted to comfort—we can be assured in our efforts that we are not alone. As well with other environmental issues, the Spirit of God is flowing in and through all of creation, and will help us make the structural changes necessary, create the alternative systems necessary, so that we, and all of the planet, may be whole/holy.

[Watch the 2:39 video or read this script](#)

We are reminded in 1 Corinthians 12 that every part of the body is very important. Those considered weaker are actually doing strong and important functions, and without them (parts like our gut and bowels) receiving healthy resources, the whole system will shut down. The body is a metaphor about the church and society, recognizing that those in society who are considered weaker are actually quite strong and important. When people are oppressed and not able to function well because of lack of healthy resources, that will shut our whole system down.

This metaphor continues as 1 Corinthians 12:21 says, "the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" Neither can I say to the trees, "I have no need of you." When I exhale, they inhale. And trees exhale oxygen, and I can inhale. The trees are an obvious part of our body. Soil may be less obvious, sometimes considered as dirt or unimportant dust. But it is soil that contains decomposed matter, made from tree, animal, and human waste; from decay it is transformed into a nutrient-source for planets to grow. Plants that we can eat to strengthen our physical body.

We must develop discipleship practices that make the connections between our individual body, our social body, and our ecological body. Otherwise I think we're missing part of the message of Christ. Humans that live disproportionately large compared to their ecosystem are not acting as an accountable part of the body. My work in sanitation helps us think about translating the "golden rule" to our water system. Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do to you.

At children's time you can read: Everybody poops! Getting used to talking about our bodily functions is a great way to reduce shame about what it means to live as an embodied person on this beautiful, fragile planet, and to show deep gratitude for the incarnation of God in Jesus.

Changing Our Lives, Dealing with Our Crap



Host an open discussion, about whatever comes up with you from the video. The discussion can be in the full group, or in smaller groups to allow for more time for each person to speak, since this topic is still new for many people to discuss.

Guiding questions

1. What is one thing you learned from the video?
 - a. (Can be many things)
 2. How do you connect the sanitation crisis and the climate crisis?
 - a. (People may need to ponder this, and below are two points)
 - b. Climate change brings both longer periods of water scarcity and more drastic periods of flooding, both of which overwhelms sanitation.
 - c. Similar overlapping dynamics of systemic injustice against marginalized peoples, both in urban and rural settings
 - d. Connections between colonialism and capitalist globalization
 3. How does environmental racism play into the sanitation crisis and the climate crisis?
 - a. (People can have many observations...facilitators contribute something from the below points if they are not made)
 - b. Catherine Coleman Flowers would answer that the lack of proper waste sanitation in rural America and communities of color takes a phenomenal toll on public health and dignity. Because state systems traditionally and continually marginalize communities of color, their requests for infrastructure upgrades and maintenance are deprioritized.
 - c. When the US does invest in infrastructure, a disproportionate amount of wastewater treatment plants (often combining human excreta, industrial wastewater, and field runoff) are located near communities of color and rural communities and they face the chemical and fume impacts of these facilities more than white and wealthy communities.
 4. We need a better way to treat our discarded resources. What ideas can you think of, or what ideas have you heard of working? Go ahead and brainstorm, even if you can't think of how your idea would work on a "big scale." We need people thinking outside the box [water closet]!
 - a. (Can be many things)
 - d. It creates, or enlarges, the protection gap. Usually the same people who are impacted by other oppressions live in similarly impacted environments. That's one way environmental injustice functions.
 - e. Colonization by European Christians brought specific technology with it. That technology overrode local technologies and was marketed as superior because of racism. This technology is not sustainable worldwide. This is one aftermath of colonization, worldviews that put indigenous communities at risk, and colonize their mentality.
- Author's thesis: People have been pooping for a long time, and have their own wisdom about how to build soil and stay safe. If supported in a decolonized, reparative way, they can and will design systems that work for them. But we have to be willing to speak about it and give sanitation as much funding as we do for clean water projects in order to have the resources we need to protect all of our body, and everyone's bodies.

Closing

Invite participants to pay attention for their poop and peeing patterns for a week, and remember to say “thank you” when they flush the toilet. Check in during the next lesson can include a question about this. See if more comfort has arrived. Giggles are welcome!



Toolkit

Activities

Get into small groups. View the websites of the groups below. After reading about the ecological sanitation organization (5–10 minutes) each group will make a 30 second or 1 minute “TV-spot” to the others gathered, advertising their NGOs services.

Organizations

SOIL Haiti <https://www.oursoil.org/> is a subscription-based service that collects excreta, and composts, and tests it at their processing site. They resell the humanure as a soil amendment. Farmers are experiencing positive impacts of the compost.

Sanivation Kenya <https://sanivation.com/> works with municipalities to divert solid refuse from the wastewater pumped from pit latrines. Heats and processes the solid refuse (poop) with sawdust and wood shavings to make a 100% recycled briquette that burns better than tree-made charcoal and leads to reduced deforestation.

Sanergy Kenya <https://www.sanergy.com/> provides safe toilet services that the government does not, then collects and transports the excreta, processing it at a huge scale, about 700,000 tons a year. Contributes to a circular economy as it creates numerous products out of one. Video [here](#).

MoSan Guatemala <https://mosan.ch/> delivers waterless toilets to rural areas with handcarts and uses microbiota to treat the resources on-site for reuse.

Shawn Shafner at the Poop Project www.thepoopproject.org can help you break the poop taboo.

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