

Podcast Bethel and Climate Emergency

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SPEAKERS

Susan Oxley, Paul Bethel

Susan Oxley 00:09

Susan, welcome to project Zion Podcast. I'm Susan Oxley from Seattle, Washington in the United States, and I'll be your host. This podcast is part of the series "Climate Brewing," which deals with the causes and effects of our climate change and our climate related crises. Today, I'm interviewing my good friend Paul Bethel from California.

Paul and I are both members of the North American climate justice team. We research climate issues and line up guest presenters for our monthly webinars on Sunday afternoons, and we have great conversations. Paul has a passion for climate justice and a strong concern about the ongoing expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure around the world by large corporations. In today's podcast, we'll hear Paul's journey toward becoming a climate activist and his take on the bad news of climate emergency and the good news of progress occurring.

Hi Paul, welcome to "Climate Brewing."

Paul Bethel 01:12

Hi, Susan. Thank you for helping me through this. This is the first time I've done one of these, so I'm a little bit nervous, but I'm kind of excited because I've watched a lot of the podcasts, so-- looking forward to this.

Susan Oxley 01:28

Well, thank you for being available. Let's jump right into it. I'm going to ask first, how did you become concerned about climate change, and what were the major influences that prompted you to become a climate activist?

Paul Bethel 01:46

Well, I think I was always a closet environmentalist. I was never a denier. I was aware and I believed about in climate change. I saw Al Gore's movie, and I I believed it. But as a closet environmentalist, you

don't really go out of your way. So even though I was aware of it, I really had no sense of urgency. I, you know, someone else was working on that, not me. It wasn't my problem.

Susan Oxley
Right.

Paul Bethel

But, you know, when it was easy and convenient, I would recycle my cans and whatnot. And if it was easy, I tried to avoid--well actually, I didn't try too much--but try to avoid buying plastic water bottles and stuff like that. Then a few years ago, I had retired and I was in the automotive industry, so I was in a fossil fuel industry. I retired and my mission center president at the time asked me if I would liaison with the climate justice team out of the GPNW [Greater Pacific Northwest Mission Center] for our mission center near PSI--

Susan Oxley 03:08
And PSI means...

Paul Bethel 03:11

Pacific Southwest International [Mission Center]. It's Southern California and Northern Mexico.

Susan Oxley 03:20
Excellent. Thank you.

Paul Bethel 03:21

I didn't want to, but hated to disappoint Denise, so I said, "Okay." I couldn't claim that I was too busy, because I recently retired. So, that! And she also asked me--and this was during covid--so she said, "You know, we have these Mission-Center-wide Zoom services, couple times a month. Would you be willing to do a little blurb on, you know, sacred creation once a month?" She said, four, five minutes, nothing. So I agreed grudgingly.

And so it was my studying and working with the Climate Justice Team and then preparing for these little you know, blurbs during the mission center zoom conferences, that I became more and more aware of the issues with climate. And you know, I think at first, I was very careful, because climate justice, in some quarters, is a political thing, and many people say that it's not appropriate for church. And so I kind of took that to heart. I was very, very careful. I didn't get too radical when I was doing things. I talked about bees and having a worm farm out on my lanai.

But then I stumbled across the saying from an old time climate activist. He was in government and Yale and stuff. That guy's name is Gus Speth, and he said that he thought the major causes of climate change were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. And he goes on to say he was wrong! That the science isn't going to fix it, the cause of climate change was selfishness, greed and apathy.

Susan Oxley:

Wow!

Paul Bethel

And he said, what we need is a spiritual and cultural transformation, and that scientists and lawyers like himself don't know how to do that. And so that kind of resonated with me. The facts and the science that we've heard, for now 50 years, wasn't working. And to be honest, I didn't have to go too far beyond my own mirror to see evidence of selfishness and greed and especially apathy.

Susan Oxley:

Right.

Paul Bethel:

So if a spiritual and cultural transformation is what's needed, then what better venue than a faith community? And in my case, my faith community, Community of Christ. And I became convinced that that is a calling and a valid calling. And you know, with help in the -- you know, the people on the climate justice team--there's a kind of a wide range... You know, I joke that some of those on the team swim in a far deeper spiritual pool than I do. But, you know, the input from those, from the team members, really kind of made things like Sacredness of Creation and the Worth of All Persons and Responsible Choices, Pursuit of Peace-- When seen through a climate lens, they suddenly coalesce, and they kind of come together. And for me, it turned the Enduring Principles, through a nature lens, turned them from catch phrases into concrete tasks.

So, and in studying, I was also exposed to other faith traditions, who are, you know, probably further down the path than what we are on issues with climate. Jim Antal is a UCC United Church of Christ minister. Has been a climate activist for years. Margaret Bullitt Jonas, she's, I think she just retired, but she was an Episcopal priest. And then, you know, long time advocates like Bill McKibben. So I'm convinced that our faith has a role to play. And the Climate Justice Team not only was a trigger for me, but also it's an important venue for not only for studying, but also for being able to share what I think is a very important message.

Susan Oxley 08:06

Wonderful. So your faith community, my faith community, Community of Christ, has recently declared that the changes in climate do constitute a climate emergency. Why do you think that's appropriate in describing what's happened?

Paul Bethel 08:24

You know when 1325, came up, I was kind of just starting my journey.

Susan Oxley 08:32

That's the resolution that was passed at the last World Conference. Resolution, yeah, go ahead.

Paul Bethel 08:39

So I felt like a climate emergency is appropriate. But I'll have to admit that my concept of what an emergency is, and how, what sort of an emergency this is, has really grown and developed in the last couple years, since that conference.

You know, for three or four decades now we've heard about climate change. We used to call it, you know, greenhouse effect. But it was always kind of a, it was a distant boogeyman somewhere way out in the future. And maybe that's kind of why I was a little bit apathetic about it, but I think especially last year, 2023, that far off someday, suddenly came home to roost. It wasn't far off. It's now. It's happening now. And you know, the evidence that we have disrupted the balance of nature is evident. It's in front of us, and it's hard to deny.

And so, you know, last year was the hottest year in 125,000 years.

Susan Oxley:

125,000 years!

Paul Bethel

It's, you know, we've had thermometers for 500 years ago and we started keeping records of those thermometer readings maybe 150 or 200 years ago. But you know, scientists, they can look at ice cores and lake sediment and whatnot, and they can kind of extrapolate climate and temperature and air quality and whatnot pretty accurately. So they say that no human society, no human society that we would recognize as a human society has ever lived in a planet this hot. 125,000 years ago, we were just starting to make little notches in bones and whatnot. So we're at a point that really is--it's a first.

Susan Oxley:

Unique.

Paul Bethel

Yeah, I mean, just this year, we've seen deadly heat waves all over the world. Last month we had three fourths of the United States was in a heat dome, and there were health warnings all over. And living in the USA, we have to remember, air conditioning is far more prevalent here than it is anywhere else in the world. And Susan, you've traveled extensively, [yes] and know that I'm sure. [Yes.] You know, I mean, the Olympic Games in France, they're struggling right now with a heat wave. It's a hundred degrees. Further south in Nice I think, you know where they do the soccer and the sailing, was 105 degrees. I read an article that the USA Olympic team brought their own air conditioners because so many of the buildings don't have air conditioning there.

But India recorded record high and record long heat waves this year. June and July, they had temperature readings: 125, 120 degrees. You know, the unofficial death toll is in the thousands. In June, over 1000 people died at the Haj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, Mecca. The temperatures there were 125 degrees. And, you know, and there's record heat waves across Africa and South America, places that aren't important enough to get news coverage, but it still costs lives. And --

Susan Oxley 12:48

It's not just heat stroke or heat prostration. It's the way heat increases the threat of underlying conditions that people already have.

Paul Bethel 12:59

Oh, yeah. If you're elderly, or if you have any kind of, any kind of infirmity, you're toast. But, okay, when the heat waves, the warmer air, it holds more water, and -- it increases evaporation. And when you remove water that manifests as a drought. And when things are hot and dry, they catch fire. So you know, we have fires all over the country right now, but last year, almost all the Midwest and the eastern seaboard was choking on the fires from the burning of the Boreal Forest up in Canada.

Right now, the Pantanal wetlands [natural region in Brazil] down below the Amazon--it's the largest wetlands in the world--and normally the fire season's July and August. It's been burning since May. So nearly 2 million acres of biodiversity has burned so far. Last week or as of the weekend, we've had over 28,000 wildfires in the US burn over four and a half million acres: already more than all of what burned last year in 2023. And we're just now starting the peak fire months of August and September.

Susan Oxley 14:30

So that doesn't auger well at all.

Paul Bethel 14:35

No. And you know, if you live in an area where you just don't have that problem, you forget. But worldwide, extreme fire occurrences have more than doubled in the last decade. Doubled in the last decade. And then, you know, once all that water goes up, it's going to come down, and it's going to come down now in a deluge. It's like a fire hose. In June, I think, Fort Lauderdale, their monthly average was 9.1 inches or something, and they had more than that fall in one day. And it was just a rainy day. It wasn't a hurricane. We've seen record flooding this year in Minnesota. They had 22 counties under FEMA disaster aid. Iowa, South Dakota, New Mexico, Nevada...

Susan Oxley 15:27

Just recently, Atlanta, Georgia.

Paul Bethel 15:31

Yeah, the southeast. Well, right now, Hurricane Debbie, it's marching up the East Coast. Originally, it hit land as a category one, only a category one! And it--and as soon as it hit land, it was downgraded to just a tropical storm. [Right.] But the forecasts are warning that Georgia and the Carolinas could see record breaking rainfall and flooding. So I read one weather.com report saying that hurricane Debbie or tropical storm Debbie, may create a ten billion dollar weather event because of the rain. Enough so that they may retire the name, even though it wasn't a big hurricane, but because of the cost of the flooding. It's flooding like we haven't seen since Noah.

Susan Oxley 16:23

And that flooding is occurring even though it's just a tropical storm, because she's hanging around. Debbie is hanging around, moving slowly, staying in one spot to just keep dumping water.

Paul Bethel 16:37

And there's a lot of water there too, a lot of water there. So that'll play out the next day or two. We'll see how that turns out.

But sure, you know, reports from NASA and Yale, National Geographic, they report rising temperatures, not only on land, but in the oceans, and it's affecting the ocean currents. So those ocean currents are important because it moves hot, warm water away from the equator, up to where it's cooler, and the cool water down, it gives Europe its climate. And when we start to mess that up, our weather is going to become unstable. If those, if the temperature, if the heat doesn't get transferred like it has for tens of thousands of years, places that have never needed air conditioners are going to need them, or else you simply can't survive there anymore.

And then the temperature also affects the jet stream, that kind of constant stream of air. That's starting to wobble, and that's how we ended up with a polar vortex in Texas a couple years ago, where no one alive has seen that before. [Right.]

So you know when I was bombing around in high school in Lamoni in my 1965 Dodge pickup, all of the carbon and soot that came out of that tailpipe of that old beater truck--it's still up there. It's still up there heating up our planet. So, you know, that's created not just a practical problem, but a climate justice problem, and I think because of that, a theological problem. So instead of loving our neighbors, we're drowning them, or we're burning them up, or we're sickening them, and we're making it so they can't grow food where they live.

And that's just now at 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit. It's about 2.5 to three [centigrade] somewhere in there. So we've given earth a two and a half degree fever, and that alone is enough to call it an emergency. [Yes, you're right] ...justified in calling it emergency. But in the past year, I think what's more critical is the trajectory that we're on. So within our lifetimes, we're on a path to see a three degree increase, which would be about five and a half degrees Fahrenheit. And when that happens--not if, but when that happens--and the science has been really accurate for decades. I mean, even all the oil companies' scientists, their predictions back in the 70's are remarkably accurate.

But if we overheat to three degrees centigrade, the United Nations' IPCC report estimates that we will see between one and 3 billion climate refugees. That's how many people are going to have to up and leave where they live, because it's either too hot or it's too wet or it's too dry to support human life anymore. So if we do nothing, if we keep going the way we are, we are on a path to creating poverty on a scale that we can't even conceive. We've created, and we are creating, unnecessary suffering of biblical proportions. [Yeah] So that's the emergency. If we stay the course, if we simply don't have the strategy, you know... That much disrupt, we can't imagine how to accommodate or even function in a world that is that disrupted. That's the emergency.

Susan Oxley 20:38

So Paul, in the face of all of that devastating news, that summary of what's happening, is there any good news?

Paul Bethel 20:53

Well, I'm glad you asked, because there is good news. You know, science...

Susan Oxley 20:59

I just don't want to end our conversation here.

Paul Bethel 21:04

Well, it's, you know, scientists and engineers, they've created what, you know, Bill McKibben calls a water-into-wine miracle. Science and technology has reduced the cost of gathering energy from the sun and from the wind by 90% over the past decade or two, to the point where, as of right now, we live on a planet where the cheapest way to get power is to point a piece of glass at the sun. It's an unbelievable gift, and it could allow for rapid progress. You know, the sun's, you know, 93... it's a long way away, but we know how to make far better use of that energy. You know, we can catch the rays on photovoltaic cells, and we can take advantage of the fact that the sun heats our planet, that creates the wind that can drive the turbines. And that provides all the power that we could possibly need. And there are, there are several states and even countries where renewable energy has exceeded and is overtaking fossil fuels.

But you know, the advances in battery technology, and not just battery, but energy storage. There's things that store energy beyond just electricity. But you know, electric vehicles, heat pumps, you know, we have the knowledge and we have the expertise, and we're enhancing that more and more. We just have to drum up the will to implement these programs. The thing with renewables is, it's free. It's available to everyone. And as long as we have a commodity like oil, the people that control it, the few that control it, they're going to exploit that monopoly for the benefit of the few. And renewables transitioning--and it's also a call for what they call a just transition. It's because the renewables are available to everyone. It's harder to make a monopoly on renewable energy and it can benefit far more people.

Susan Oxley 23:28

Well, that's excellent good news. I appreciate that. We do need to close off for now. But what else would you like to share before we end? What? How would you like to conclude your remarks?

Paul Bethel 23:44

Really quickly, we need to do three things. We have to stop increasing the burning of fossil fuels. You know, when you talk about it, people, they knee-jerk--they jump into going, "Oh, we can't turn off the spigot. We can't shut off the oil hose!" No, that's not what we're saying. We're saying stop adding spigots. Stop adding hoses. That's the first thing we have to do: stop building more pipelines and more methane terminals.

And then we have to invest in and push the innovation of renewables. And then we also, and you can do it at the same time, we have to find ways to cut back. We have to find ways to reduce our oil consumption, and you can do all three at once. But the people that get all concerned that, "Oh, I won't be able to get gas from my car!" That's not what we're saying. We gotta stop increasing. That's the first thing we have to agree to.

Susan Oxley 24:48

Wow. Thank you so much. I really appreciate your passion, Paul. I'm glad that you have been able to do the research you have and been able to share the information with us. Thank you so much..

Paul Bethel 24:59

Thanks for helping me through this.

Susan Oxley 25:03

You did great. Talk to you later.

Paul Bethel 25:06

Okay, bye.