Wake up and smell the coffee. Maybe your partner started the brewing while you were sleeping and there you are lying in bed and soon consciousness and the wafts of deep, dark aromas arrive simultaneously and then, there it is waiting for you: a good, hot, steaming, fresh cup of joe... there ain't much in this world that is finer. Saddled up with a piece of pie or just by itself on a cool morning, steam rising to greet you with that unmistakable aroma, the body almost instinctively goes "Ahhhhhh". It is an acquired taste, an adult taste, a refined taste. True Coffee Connoisseurs rival aficionados of wine in their descriptive imagery of "bright", "bold", "flowery", and "imposing". The growth of the behemoth Starbucks is an indication of how important the brown elixir has become in our collective lives, but on the individual level, many of us have our own personal journeys with the demon cup.

I'm sure I had a sip or two of coffee out of my parent's cups as I was growing up, but as they were both confirmed black only drinkers it had none of the creamy sweetness that would lure young taste buds. At the age of 13, I jumped into the coffee pool. I was an odd kid, hell, I'm an odd adult, and part of that oddness was centered around the Jerry Lewis MDA telethon on labor day weekend. My parents always watched the telethon for hours and hours and I too would sit year after year watching Paul Anka, Totie Fields, Norm Crosby, and a host of others do a few songs or bits of comedy in between the presentations of donations. The concept of a television show that went on all night was quite astounding and I just had to know what went on in the wee hours. So....after my parents went to bed, I stayed up watching and when I started to get sleepy, I got out a jar of Yuban instant coffee and made my first cup. It wasn't particularly tasty, but I knew it would help me stay awake, so I choked it down. By 6:30 am, when my mother came out, I had consumed 8 cups on an empty stomach (being a fat teenager who was trying to diet) and had a powerful stomachache and bleary eyes.

I basically stayed away from coffee from then until college where the cafeteria machine dispensed brown sludge followed by water and if you really needed the caffeine jolt, you would remove the cup when the water came and just get three shots of sludge and where the coffee shop on campus gave out free coffee from 11:30 until midnight for those of us who would trudge back to the library until 2AM. During my sophomore year, I bribed a friend's sister to bring me Dunkin Donuts coffee by the pound (then unavailable for purchase by consumers), which I made in my own machine in my dorm room. By senior year, I was grinding my own beans. In the late 80's, I discovered Black Tiger, a blend from Coffee People up in Portland Oregon that had 3 times the amount of caffeine of regular coffee.

In grad school, our office became the place for coffee on the floor and the pot was full night and day as other students and faculty alike came by for a cup. I realized I might have a problem one day when I noticed that I had made three 12 cup pots and no one else had been drinking any coffee that day. The next day I decided to go cold turkey and...
get the Java Monkey off my back. After 13 days of excruciating headaches, I relented and went back to the cup for many years, albeit at a reduced rate. Just before moving here to Stockton, I slowly weaned myself off of caffeine (although I was still drinking 3-4 cups of decaf everyday...It wasn't just the drug that I loved) and stayed basically caffeine free until last Fall after Max was born and I had to teach a 7:30 am class, often after very little sleep. If all goes according to plan I will slowly wean myself away from caffeine again this fall, but I will till have a big pot o' decaf warming up my office at Delta.

I'm sure many of you have similarly sordid tales about your experiences with the java jive, while those of you who never touch the stuff are suitably bored by now, but the point of this Sunday is not to share my entire personal history with coffee (That is at least a two triple latte conversation), but instead to get you to think a bit about where coffee comes from and how it is produced. I should also note that much of the information I am sharing today comes from the book, Stuff: The Secret Lives of everyday Things by Ryan and Durning. Coffee is the world's second largest legal export commodity (after oil) and is mostly produced in underdeveloped and developing countries. It is a labor intensive and land intensive crop. It takes about 100 beans to produce a single cup of coffee, about 1/60th of the entire production of a coffee tree for an entire year. To put it another way, if you drink 2 cups per day over an entire year you will consume 34 gallons of coffee made from 18 pounds of beans. It will take 12 coffee trees an entire year to produce enough coffee to meet this modest two cup a day habit.

Fifty to a hundred years ago, most coffee was grown in forests or plantations which sported a number of indigenous plants. Coffee was in large part a piece of a larger ecosystem. Not so today. In order to maximize yield, farmers in most coffee growing areas of the world chopped down the forests and intermingled shady hardwood trees alike in order to plant newer high yield coffee trees in direct sunlight. This change increased their harvests, but it led to high levels of erosion and the loss of rich nutrients provided by other plants and trees. Without the benefit of such flora, those twelve coffee trees now require almost a pound of fertilizer each to keep growing in the harsh sun.

The loss of native plant species also decimated the insect and bird populations. For most of the history of the planet, coffee farms had a wide variety of birds who lived in the canopies of the taller fruit and hardwood trees. Not only native species like Toucans and Parrots, but also migratory North American birds like warblers, tanagers, orioles, and thrushes. Removing the native plants led to the loss of birds: Biologists estimate that there are only 5% as many bird species in the new sunny coffee fields as there were in the traditional shaded coffee plantations they replaced.

The loss of birds and beneficial insects led to the need for increased use of pesticides, as crop threatening pests proliferated with the loss of their natural predators. Many of the chemicals were absorbed by nearby plants and animals or by the workers spraying the trees a number of times per year. And who are these workers? Most are poor peasants toiling under hot sun in a landscape devoid of cooling shade, making less than a dollar a day picking the coffee berries that will eventually become our morning ritual (I say "Our" because the United States is the number one importer of coffee worldwide.). Because of the low prices paid by the conventional market, many of the farmers are forced to clear cut even more land in hope of growing more coffee and the vicious cycle continues.
How did we get to this point? In the middle part of this century, the United States and other developed countries gave out massive loans to the developing countries. In time, the loans came due even though development had not necessarily taken place (for example loans were provided to buy US tractors to modernize agriculture, but because poor farmers could not afford the fuel or repairs on the machinery, they often rusted or fell into disrepair. Even though the machinery was of no use, the bills still had to be paid).

Today many of the world's poorest countries use one third of their national budgets to pay off foreign debt. Now what is the one of the best ways to pay off debt? To grow so called "cash crops" which will bring higher profits. Around the world, farmers in the poorest countries are urged or forced to grow sugar, tobacco, beef and coffee for export to the developed world instead of growing food for the people of the poorer nations. Not only do these cash crops lead to hunger, they also encourage rainforest destruction or the planting of high yield plants, as in the case of coffee, which further devastate the environment in order to meet their debt payments.

"What then must we do?" Well first, in the jargon of the late dear Abby, we need to wake up and smell the coffee. As knowledge is power, we need to awaken to the reality of our consumption patterns in general and of coffee in particular. When we become aware of the ecological and human costs of traditional coffee production, it seems imperative that we find a different way, a better way.

There is an alternative to the conventional coffee trade: Instead of exploiting farmers and workers and creating a system where they in turn exploit the environment, we could instead pay the farmers of small coffee plantations a decent price for their beans and even more if they were to farm in sustainable and organic ways. Such a practice is known as fair trade coffee production. In conjunction with Stockton's Metro Ministry and a nationwide Interfaith movement, an organization known as Equal Exchange has arranged to provide socially and environmentally responsible coffee to churches across the country and throughout the world.

The premise of fair trade as practiced by Equal Exchange supports small farmers by guaranteeing them prices higher than the world market price. In addition, if the world market price should happen to fall, farmers in the program are guaranteed a minimum price of $1.26 per pound (In 1992 for example the world market price fell to 48 cents, but the farmers in the program still made a fair wage at $1.26.) If the prices should rise, Equal Exchange still pays at least 5 cents over the world market prices. Thus farmers are given a fair wage that they can depend on regardless of market fluctuations. Furthermore, by purchasing all of its coffee from small farming cooperatives, Equal Exchange is able to create direct and long lasting relationships with the farmers.

In the conventional coffee trade the coffee is picked by farmers who sell to middle men who sell to processors who sell to exporters who sell to U.S. brokers who sell to coffee companies who sell to distributors who sell to stores who sell to consumers. In the fair trade arrangement the small farmers combine into farmer cooperatives which sell to Equal Exchange which sells to congregations and individuals. By cutting out so many middle men, the farmers are able to make a fair and living wage. In addition, Equal Exchange provides affordable credit to new or expanding farms and provides
developmental assistance to encourage farmers and citizens to help their communities and recover from storms and other natural disasters.

Fair trade is not only a boon for the farmers, it also helps the environment. By providing a fair and living wage to small farmers, the desire to cut down forests or rely on fertilizer and pesticides is reduced. Thus, almost all of the coffee offered by Equal Exchange is shade coffee, grown in the shade of the larger fruit and hardwood trees that populated coffee plantations 50 or more years ago. With the shade come the birds and beneficial insects, thus reducing the need for fertilizers and pesticides. On top of this, Equal Exchange pays another 15 cents per pound for coffee which is grown organically to further encourage farmers to do the right thing for their local communities and the world.

This morning you and I have an opportunity to walk our talk about social justice and compassion. Thanks to Metro Ministry we have brewed up pots of regular and decaf free trade coffee from Equal Exchange. In addition, we have a few packages for sale in the bookstore for those of you who want to take some home.... This could be a one time experiment or it could become a regular part of the practices of this church. Fair trade coffee costs more than what we normally buy in the big cans at the grocery store, but no more than Starbucks. If we want to contribute to social and environmental justice in the coffee trade, it is going to mean that we are going to have to put more than a nickel or dime in the donation jar for each cup. If each of us were to pay 50 cents, only 50 cents, for each Sunday we drink coffee, then our consumption could make the world a better place.

So what is it worth to you? Is it worth 50 cents for a cup of joe that supports small independent farms and promotes ecological well being? I can only hope that you, as members of this congregation, respond with a hearty "Yes" by filling the donation cup at coffee hour each and every week with enough money to allow us to purchase Fair trade coffee. Fifty cents or even dollar once in awhile to defray the costs for visitors or those who have forgotten to pay will go a long way towards making this a gentler and more just world. In a few minutes when you go into Jackson Hall for conversation and fair trade coffee, think about how good that cup of coffee is, not just for the taste buds, but also for the soul.

Go ahead: Wake up and smell the coffee...Wake up and smell the equality.