

Creation Sunday - Proper 22  
Grace St. Paul's - 10/7/12

In the name of the God whose very essence is composed of relationship, a God that said, "Let us make humankind in our image." Amen.

I don't know if children still say it or not. But when I was a kid, it was the stock response to anyone who verbally attacked you. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Never was a more untrue aphorism ever uttered. Some of the greatest damage ever inflicted has come from the words we use to hurt one another. I grew up in a chippy, blue collar neighborhood where I was often literally hit by rocks thrown by others. I particularly remember one that caught me right here, while my back was turned, literally knocking me to my knees. But the damage I continue to carry with me from that time has nothing to do with those physical attacks. It came from the hurtful words people used to assault me.

Words remain the most powerful force the world has ever known. Chosen with deliberation, and delivered with skill and expertise, they can lift us to the greatest heights imaginable. But as we know all too well, they can also maim and destroy us. Such is the case with the organism that we call earth, our island home. In fact, when we study the history of the degradation perpetrated upon our planet, I would suggest that much of that destruction can be traced not only to words, but to one specific word.

That word appears in our sacred text twice within the first chapter. Would anyone like to guess as to my nomination for the most destructive word the world has ever known? That's it. Dominion.

From the first chapter of Genesis and throughout the text, the cosmos is continually described as "good" and coming from God. We hear that expressed in today's biblical readings and in hundreds of other places throughout the text. But when it came to the church formulating a theology of creation and describing what role humans are to play in all of this, it seems that we set aside all those other words and chose instead to concentrate on that one word.

"Then God said, 'let them have "dominion over" the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth.'"

We can point the finger all we want at those greedy capitalists and those corporate raiders. We can rage against the machine for what “they” have done to create the present ecological crisis in which we reside. But the truth is that we are the ones who gave ethical permission to replace wildlife habitats with parking lots, to knock down forests anywhere to build more strip malls, to take away the homes of one species after another for human endeavor, to shoot water into the air in the middle of the desert and turn it into a humidifier, to spew carbon dioxide at such alarming rates that the planet can no longer absorb it, creating new weather patterns that threaten to kill everything, including us. The truth is, it is the Christian theology of creation that taught the world that we have a divine right to have dominion over all of the earth and allowed us to do whatever we damn well please to it without asking.

This was recognized as early as 1967, when an historian named Lynn White wrote an article in “Science” magazine. In it, he said plainly that the roots of the ecological crisis were religious. He noted that this is particularly true of the Christian tradition, which has taught people, he said, “to view themselves as superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.”

I am not sure that as a church, we have yet to accept responsibility for the gigantic part we have played in creating the environmental crisis and inflicting such suffering on our fellow creatures. But thankfully, we have finally moved beyond that one word “dominion”. You don’t hear it much anymore because it has been replaced by another word. Everywhere you go today in Christian circles, the word dominion has been superseded with the word stewardship. As stewards of God’s world, Christians now see our role much like The National Park service describes theirs. We are to protect the land and the wildlife for future generations. We also use this same word in churches every year to describe our campaigns to raise money. We are to be stewards of our churches, because they are not ours. They, like God’s creation, are on loan to us. We are thus morally compelled to make sure they are here for those who follow us.

This change in theology has been a huge leap in reversing the trend of environmental destruction that we have all experienced in our lifetime. I am grateful for it. But those of you who have heard me preach about Creation before, know that I remain troubled with the notion of stewardship. First of all, we must ask, where did it come from? As harmful as the word dominion has been for Creation, what is the biblical

basis for throwing it out and replacing it with stewardship? Does the concept of stewardship accurately represent Biblical faith?

Stewardship implies a utilitarian relationship between humans and nature. It sees the world not existing for itself, but rather as something for humans to use. The natural world should be saved, in a stewardship model, because if we don't, we are all going to die. It is not about the dignity of life for another creature, but instead about managing the world for the good of humanity. Few of you are exposed to the Prayers of the People as they are written in the Book of Common Prayer, because we always write our own. But Form IV of those Prayers, found on page 388 of that red book in your pews, points out for me the biblical inconsistency with understanding our role as stewards. "Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation," the prayer begins. So far, so good. But then it concludes, "that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory." I have to tell you, my hair stands up on end every time I hear that prayer. Did God really make the bald eagle for us to use for target practice? Are the whales of the seas there for us to have a source of petroleum? Are the disappearing mountain lions of our desert just a nuisance for us to eradicate? Was our Grand Canyon formed to create a large drinking fountain for human beings? Was God's world really created as something for humanity to harvest?

Many years ago, I made my first visit to the edge of a great red rock desert in the Needles district of Canyonlands National Park. I sat around a campfire with six others that night, the only people within 50 miles of that spot. It was there for the first time that I heard a ranger tell the story of the cosmos. If we were to symbolize the length of the entire time it took for creation to come to this point and graphed it on the scale of a single year, the sun and the planets would have come into existence in the month of September. Human beings would make their first appearance at ten minutes before midnight on December 31. Modern human history would begin after the last second before midnight. It strikes me as not only unbiblical but also the height of arrogance to believe that the entire universe was all created by God to exist for billions of years, just so humans could come on the scene for a flash of a second and use it all for our own selfish purposes. That is what the concept of stewardship suggests.

I would suggest that we are missing something here. Something big, something cosmic. And I believe that we do not have to abandon our Biblical roots to discover it. In fact, I would ask us to go right back to that same sentence that has caused such

suffering for our planet. We just need to listen to the whole sentence, rather than just that one word. “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over...”

As images of God, we are told by God that we are to have dominion all right, but we are to have dominion in the same way that God has dominion. Note that God does not say according to my likeness, but rather, according to OUR likeness. God describes God in the plural. Our God is not a single despotic ruler sitting by Godself on a throne, making arbitrary decisions about the world and us. Instead, God lives in relationship. God does not exist except in relationship to God and the world. What God is telling us is that dominion means being in relationship to creation as God is in relationship to creation. As such, we cannot destroy it at will, or even see it as our resource. Instead, we are called to be in relationship with it, to see it as part of us and part of God, just as God is in relationship as Creator, Liberator and Sustainer. The essence of dominion as described by God in Genesis is to protect and care for it as a mother protects her children.

All of which brings us to today’s Gospel. I realize that at first glance, a discussion about divorce seems slightly out of place in this Creation service. But the point Jesus makes is really the same issue.

Today, Jesus gives us a lesson in family values and he states very clearly that divorce is unacceptable. How then, can we as a church, suggest that divorce is not always wrong? The answer is the same as always. CONTEXT. What is going on in the culture surrounding Jesus? Why do the Pharisees ask this question?

As usual, what the Pharisees are trying to do is trap Jesus. The issue for them was not whether divorce was allowable. The question was about grounds for divorce. The Torah makes it clear that divorce is acceptable.

But as he so often does, Jesus turns the question upside down. The legality of divorce doesn’t interest Jesus. Instead, he wants to know what the intention of marriage is, from God’s point of view. Just like we have today, Jesus turns to Genesis and notes that God created marriage to be about relationship. Because God has created humanity as images of God, and the essence of God is relationship, God creates marriage. This relationship is so important that Genesis says that it supersedes our relationships with our own blood family.

First, marriage represents for Jesus what humanity is supposed to be all about, namely relationship. Breaking relationship for the sole purpose of creating a new one then, is unacceptable in the eyes of Jesus.

Second, we are speaking of the day when marriages were pre-arranged. Divorce was not an issue in the peasant world, but was a regular fact of life in the aristocratic world. It was all a part of assuring that you were aligning your family with the right people to give you honor and financial benefit. Jesus balks at divorce for the same reason he protests the sabbath rules or the purity code. Jesus is against divorce because it is oppressing the lower class.

Third, we need to remember that according to Jewish law, divorce could only be initiated by the husband, and adultery only applies against the man's rights. If a man wanted to divorce his wife, all he needed to do according to Deuteronomy 24:3, was sit down and write her a note to kick her out on the street.

What the divorce law did was create an entire culture of outcasts. Widows in the bible, are not just wives whose husband's had died. They are also women who have been divorced, people who had no way to support themselves and were ostracized from society. What Jesus is railing against is a religious/political system that suggests that a man should have DOMINION OVER a wife, that a man could do whatever he damn well feels like to someone else.

It may seem totally off the subject when Mark continues this discussion by talking about children. But, once again, it is the same issue. Just as husbands could divorce their wives by just writing them off, so too could they divorce their children by never letting them in, or by just abandoning them to die. The issue in both cases is about power over another. It is about not imaging God. It is about seeing other people not as people, but as RESOURCES to do with as you see fit. It is a repudiation of both our definition of dominion over, and stewardship over another individual. For Jesus, just as for God in Genesis, dominion is not about power over. Dominion does not mean that a man can just throw a woman out on the street anymore than it means that we can indiscriminately take away a species habitat. Dominion is supposed to be about relationship, about honoring the other individual just as we are called to honor other species and all of God's earth.

Just as the old definition of dominion makes no sense when we understand God in relationship, the word stewardship makes no sense to Jesus in today's Gospel. A

loving relationship could never mean that a husband is steward of his wife or his husband. That is a power over relationship. The same holds true in our relationship to the earth. If we are followers of Jesus, than it can never be something to use. It is something that we are called to be in relationship with, just like we are called to be in relationship with a human being.

Beloved, the time has come for us to move beyond both the old understanding of dominion and the newer concept of stewardship. The time has come to capture what God and what Jesus meant when they spoke of dominion. If we have to choose another single word to represent what they meant, let me nominate the word kinship. Perhaps we have not mastered it yet, but we seem to understand now Jesus's call for us to protect powerless human beings. It is time for us to realize that God calls us to also be in that same relationship, that kinship, with all of God's creation. We are called to protect bears, mountain lions, eagles, condors, dolphins, minnows, plants, trees and rocks, just like we are called to care for the widow and the orphan. The time has come to hear our call to treat all of the earth not as a resource, but as our kin, as our child, as God's kin.

The time has also come for us to accept the role we, as the church, have played in the destruction of God's creation. And now it is time to do something about it. Every age has a deep religious calling to bring about a wholly new worldview. This is ours. This is the evangelism of our time. It is time for us to fundamentally shift the role of religion in the world. It is time for us to make honoring the earth as sacred the central function of Christianity. It is time for us to not just hear the cry of God's people, but to hear and respond to the cry of God's earth. It is time for us to abandon stewardship forever and embrace God's meaning of dominion, relationship, kinship. It is time to be the images of God we are called to be. This is Jesus's call. This is God's call. There is no more important thing any of us will ever do. Amen.