

Responsible Earthkeeping

May 31, 2015

Genesis 1:26

Today's Scripture reading comes from the beginning of the Bible. It is found near the end of the first creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. Our verse – verse 26 – speaks not only to who we are but to our role in caring for all of creation.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."¹

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words.

Let us pray . . . God of earth and sky and sea and God of us all, help us to see the beauty of creation and to hear your call to partner with you so that such beauty endures for all generations. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Dominion is one of those words that makes me cringe. I cannot hear the word in any context without having some kind of reaction. There are many reasons for it, including a very troubling experience with a rather unconventional church.

This church practiced Dominion Theology and took this task so seriously that it shaped every aspect of their identity. They understood that it was their role – along with other churches that held Dominionist views – to rise up and take control of the world beginning with our country. Their plan was a Crusade of sorts by which they were determined to rule our country by replacing our democracy with their theocracy. For them, the rule of Christ needed to become the rule of our land as soon as possible and by nearly any means possible.

So now you understand one reason why I would have liked to simply skip over the word dominion in this morning's passage. A more troubling reason that hits closer to home for many gathered here is the way good Christian people have used the "d" word as a license to do whatever they wanted to harm the earth. Unfortunately this "the

¹ NRSV

earth is ours and we can do with it as we like” approach was all too common for many centuries.

During our lifetimes that approach has given way to one that both takes into account the earth challenges of our age and takes seriously the biblical text.

The Lutheran Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim suggests that the Hebrew verb we have translated as dominion “must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation.” And, he believes that “As the image of God, humans should relate to the nonhuman as God relates to them.”²

Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the best known living Christian scholar of the Old Testament, explores what it means to be made in the image of God and suggests that this image is a “mandate of power and responsibility.”³

If you look at the Scripture printed in your bulletin you will notice it comes from the contemporary paraphrase *The Message*.⁴ It has done for us what the academics have recommended by replacing the word dominion and all of its many violent connotations with the word responsible. We – all of us humans – every single one of us – as those made in the image of God have a responsibility to care for creation.

This is our shared responsibility. Together we have so much to do! The magnitude is such that we could spend a lifetime just exploring the possibilities.

I am thankful that our denomination – the United Church of Christ – has been a leader in this area for some time. I especially think of the recent Mission 4/1 campaign that challenged members of our congregations to plant 100,000 trees, write 100,000 advocacy letters, and volunteer 1 million hours of earth care. This was a bold goal. Together, however, we achieved it!

Those who have been a part of this community of faith longer than I likely remember the important role we played in this effort. For those

² Terence E. Fretheim. *Genesis – The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Volume 1*, Abingdon Press, 1994, p.346.

³ Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis - Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, 1982, p.32.

⁴ God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth."

50 days we came together to do our part and then some. Everyone affiliated with this congregation was asked to complete a progress card each week. The results of the cards were posted on a Success Tree.

That campaign happened in 2013. Without such an organized national effort it is easy to relax and return to the status quo. Our responsibility, however, simply won't allow it.

So why don't we begin with something that is all around us and may soon cover us: water. All week long I have seen images of far too much water in so many cities in Texas. Water covering cars and flooding homes and businesses. Water changing lives and even claiming lives.

There are many reasons why these heavy rains are causing damage beyond the scope I have ever seen in my home state yet they all relate to our responsibility to care for the earth. With 5 of the nation's 10 fastest growing cities and many suburbs and exurbs with inadequate floodplains can we expect anything less than devastation?⁵

Closer to home climate change that has been and will continue to cause sea levels to rise means that coastal cities will flood more easily and more often in the decades ahead. Many of today's beautiful beachfront property here in Florida may be gone before the century ends. In fact, Miami has been identified as the #1 city worldwide in terms of expected property damage and loss.⁶

Water and our responsible use of it will be key as our population continues to grow from 7 billion today to 9 billion by 2050 and 11 billion by 2111.⁷ Recent stories about water shortages in California as well as projects about just how much worse things are likely to get there have been mainstays in the news for some time. While not a permanent solution mandatory water cuts have already been enacted.⁸

⁵ James Gerken. "Heavy Rains on Sprawling Communities Contribute to Texas Flooding" in the Huffington Post, May 27, 2015. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/27/texas-flooding-rains-sprawl_n_7451708.html>

⁶ Jeff Goodell. "Goodbye Miami" in Rolling Stone, June 20, 13

<<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/why-the-city-of-miami-is-doomed-to-drown-20130620>>

⁷ Damian Carrington. "World population to Hit 11bn in 2100 – with 70% Chance of Continuous Rise" in The Guardian, September 18, 2014

<<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/18/world-population-new-study-11bn-2100>>

⁸ Haeyoun Park, Matthew Ericson, Matthew Bloch and Derek Watkins. "How Water Cuts Could Affect Every Community in California" in the New York Times, April 1, 2015 then updated May 6, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/04/01/us/water-use-in-california.html?_r=0>

Earlier this month at the Spring Gathering of the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ I cast one of the votes to approve a resolution to ban fracking. Some of the many concerns about fracking are water related including the millions of gallons of fresh water it removes from the water cycle⁹ and the potential harm to well and surface water now and in years to come.¹⁰

We are to be responsible not just for water but for all of creation. How we do this individually and together can take many shapes.

- In your bulletin you will find a list of practical things you can do plus a link to a carbon calculator that is a helpful tool for considering even more opportunities to live a greener lifestyle.
- After worship you can stop by the Green Corner in Fellowship Hall to see some of our group efforts in action and to consider how you might get involved.

These specific actions are important, but they must never become just one more checklist in our quest to be model citizens. They must be birthed by our sense of responsibility for the earth – a responsibility that pushes us to new levels of caring for the earth.

Jostein Gaarder, the Norwegian author best known for *Sophie's World*, believes our responsibility is so significant that it is time for an updated version of the Golden Rule.

Remember the original from Matthew 7:12?

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you¹¹

This basic ethical principle of reciprocity is something we share with nearly all of the world's great religions.

By calling for a Golden Rule 2.0. Gaarder hopes that we will expand our understanding of the other by moving from the people we will encounter in our lives to all of the peoples that will follow in future generations.¹² In fact, he argues that it is our responsibility to use the earth's limited resources in ways that will ensure our descendants can do as we are doing.¹³

Our earthkeeping tasks are many, but so are the future generations that are depending on us. Amen.

⁹ USGS. "Hydraulic Fracturing ("Fracking") FAQs" <<http://www.usgs.gov/faq/categories/10132/3824%20>>

¹⁰ Clean Water Actions. "Fracking: The Dangers." <<http://www.cleanwateraction.org/page/fracking-dangers>>

¹¹ Matthew 7:12a, NRSV

¹² Andrew C. Revkin. "Do Humans Need a Golden Rule 2.0?" in the New York Times, May 25, 2010

<<http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/do-humans-need-a-golden-rule-2-0/>>

¹³ Ibid.