Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Trinity Sunday

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MADE IN GOD’S IMAGE Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Psalm 8

I have chosen a text for this morning’s sermon. It is from the first account of creation recorded in the first chapter of Genesis:

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

the wild animals of the earth, and over every

creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

*So God created humankind in his image,*

*in the image of God he created them;*

*male and female he created them.*

—Genesis 1:26–27

This text could form the basis for several sermons, and so what I will share this morning will represent only a beginning. The first thing to note is something we shared in our Lectionary Study group last Wednesday. It is God’s use of the plural pronouns “us” instead of “me” as God sets out to create humankind. “Then God said, ‘Let **us** make humankind in **our** image, according to **our** likeness.” This is curious. Why did not God say instead, “Let **me** make humankind in **my** image, according to **my** likeness?” Why **“us”** and **“our”** rather than **“me”** and **my”**? I like Karl Barth’s interpretation. He said that the use of the plural **“us”** and **“our”** is a sign that God’s own being contains relationship within itself. Or, as Walter Brueggemann has said, relationality is to be found at the very center of the Biblical narrative. It is all about relationship: God’s relationship with God’s own being; God’s relationship with humankind, both male and female; the relationship of human beings one with another; and the relationship between human beings and the creation. It’s all about relationship. Individualism, the focus on the individual human being apart from God, from others, or from the earth is alien to the bible’s understanding of what it means to be human. Humankind is created in the plural: “male and female he created them.” We are created to be in relationship. There is no such thing as “going it alone.” To do so would be to go against God’s intention in creating us in the first place. In contrast to other creatures, God creates humankind a “little lower than the angels” so that God will have partners in creation with whom God can be in relationship. Human beings are created to be partners with God in the ongoing care of the creation.

And so it is that we are made in God’s image, God’s likeness. In all the created order, this is only said of us human beings. But what does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God? The key, I believe, is to be found in the word “dominion.” Like God, who has dominion over all of life, including human life, we are granted dominion over the things of the earth. God says of us human beings, “Let them have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” This theme is repeated in the Eighth Psalm:

*You have given them dominion over the works*

*of your hands;*

*you have put all things under their feet,*

*all sheep and oxen,*

*and also the beasts of the field,*

*the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,*

*whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

—Psalm 8:6–8

In times past, the word “dominion” has gotten us into trouble, especially when we have linked this word with the word “domination.” We have used the biblical “dominion” as a mandate to dominate the earth, to use the earth in whatever way we please. And if we happen to belong to the 6 percent of the earth’s population, as we indeed do, we have been using 60 percent of the earth’s resources, all to the detriment of the other 94 percent of the planet’s people who are constantly threatened with hunger and deprivation.

Those who are serious about the care of the planet, including many Christian theologians, have been about the task of re-defining the meaning of the word “dominion.” What is really meant by dominion is “Lordship” or “rule” or, as Douglas John Hall has suggested, “stewardship.”

And so our rule, our stewardship over the things of the earth is to be like God’s rule and stewardship over all of life.

And how do we describe God’s rule over all of life? I hope we will say that God’s rule has nothing to do with domination. No, God’s rule, according to the biblical narrative, has to do with five qualities. God’s rule has to do with

Justice

Righteousness

Steadfast love

Mercy

Faithfulness[[1]](#footnote-1)

These are all relational terms, that is, they have to do with God’s relationship with human beings and with the whole of creation. These characterize God’s dominion, God’s rule. And as for our rule, our dominion in the earth, we are created to mirror God’s justice, God’s righteousness, God’s steadfast love, God’s mercy, and God’s faithfulness in our relationships with one another and with the earth itself. This is what it means to be made in the image of God and according to God’s likeness.

And we who are Christian need look no further than to Christ Jesus to discover the way we are to exercise our dominion. He was One who did not grasp for equality with God, but as God’s beloved child, took on the form of a servant and was obedient, even to death upon a cross. As Paul says to the church in Philippi, we are to have the same mind that was in him. We are created to be servants in the manner of Christ. Therein lies the meaning of what it means to be made in God’s image.

Our human dominion, our human rule, our stewardship, then, will be judged according to the quality of our servanthood. We are created to be servant stewards who serve and care for one another and the earth itself with justice, righteousness, steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. This is the bottom line. Knowing this, as Christians, it is little wonder that we were so dismayed and upset when president Trump withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord. To be made in God’s image is to care for the creation, not to abandon it in its hour of need.

But here’s the problem. We are made in God’s image to mirror God’s likeness on the face of the earth, but we fall short. We human creatures are compassionate and also selfish, co-operative and also divisive, merciful and also unforgiving, faithful and also disobedient. As Walter Bruegemann says, “we have come to understand that we are multivoiced, multilayered creatures filled with ambiguity and contradiction, capable of insatiable self-regard, deeply needy and profoundly inadequate, and yet capable of profound generosity and risk.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

My sisters and brothers, I believe that the Spirit of God continually calls us back to be the people God created us to be—human beings who are created a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honor, human beings whose calling it is to mirror the dominion of God, a dominion, a rule, a stewardship grounded in the way of servanthood, a rule that is focused upon our relationship with God, with one another, and with the earth itself, a rule that is to be governed by justice, righteousness, steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. Our prayer today and always: O God, grant us the grace so to be the people we were created to be. Amen.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *God, Neighbor, Empire* (Baylor Press, 2016) 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)