

Remember Our Place

Psalm 14

Luke 15:1-10

9/15/19

In Genesis 1, we find these words, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”¹ We hear that and we think, “We are in charge! We are meant to control it! It’s ours!”

Grabbing a verse out of context and using it alone as justification for ethics is common behavior among Christians and it spans every theological perspective. But the world does not belong to us. Both Deuteronomy and the Psalms remind us that earth and all that is in it belongs to God.² That verse about dominion is just one verse removed from the message that humanity is created in the image of God. Jesus taught us that God was a loving father who cared tenderly for the birds and the flowers and all other things. The charge in Genesis was given with the expectations that humans would care for creation in the same way that God cares for it.

It’s only recently in human history that humans have begun to think there was the possibility of being in charge. Early human history found us at the mercy of the elements, the weather, the abundance or lack thereof of the harvests, wild animals, plagues. A few of the most powerful city states of the ancient world would sometimes come to believe they had risen above all were in control, but natural disasters would arise and wreck that view.

Humans developed more complicated tools and found more efficient ways to organize and cooperate. These advances brought us to the point where we began to exploit resources sometimes to the benefit of all but often more for the benefit a few.

The last couple of centuries have seen a dramatic change in the relationship we have with creation. Advanced technology, scientific discoveries, large scale manufacturing, increased societal wealth, modern medicine have all produced a dramatic shift. We don’t just survive in creation. We don’t just exploit creation’s resource for our benefit. We have begun to chart new courses.

Some of this we all agree is good – like new treatments for cancer. Some we argue about – like genetically modified crops. Some keep us up at night – like the possibility of extremely deadly genetically engineered biological weapons. And we can’t forget the benefits even now aren’t universal. Many still live conditions that are very close to how the first humans live.

If all we do is pursue control of creation, we are making some critical mistakes, and these will be to humanity’s detriment. The biblical witness has some wisdom for us that will help us remember our place.

¹ Genesis 1:28, NRSV.

² Deuteronomy 10:14, Psalm 24:1-2.

We need to consider the idea of stewardship. In the ancient world, stewards were almost always slaves owned by wealthy landowners. A slave who was given the role of steward had proven to be trustworthy. The slave showed wisdom and the skill needed to preserve and increase the wealth of the master. Any steward who carelessly used up the master's resources would not remain a steward. Any steward who abused the master's resources would also find a quick exit from this job.

Scripture and our Reformed tradition emphasize that all we have is a gift from God and we are stewards of these blessings. We have a responsibility to care for our shared resources. The air we breathe, the water we drink and use for cooking and cleaning, the food that comes to us from the fields, the raw materials we harvest from the earth to make what we need are shared resources. All we have is a gift. And all we have is meant to be shown as much care as an ancient steward would have shown for his or her master's possessions.

We must remember our place. We must remember we are stewards.

In Luke 18 Jesus tells a story about two men who went up to the temple to pray. One listed all his wonderful accomplishments – he wasn't a thief, a rogue, an adulterer or a tax collector. And he gave 10 percent of his income to the temple and fasted twice a week. The other man who happened to be a tax collector, simply hung his head and cried to God for forgiveness.

In Psalm 14, we encounter the fool – this is the one who holds this thought in the heart: “There is no God.” Donald McKim helps us understand this.

In the Old Testament, the fool is not only one with no sense, but also the one who resolutely rejects the highest "wisdom" of all, which is the fear and obedience of God. The fool is the one who disregards God, convinced that God does not matter in life. Fools have thus closed their minds to God and to all God's instructions—not defining God as nonexistent, but shutting God out from their life.³

That first man in the temple is the fool because he sees no need for God in his life. In his own eyes, he is perfect. By contrast the second man, the tax collector is wise. He recognizes his brokenness and understands he needs God very, very much!

The foolish arrogance of the first man closely mirrors much of our attitude to creation. We use it carelessly. We hoard its resources. We remain largely unmoved by the suffering of millions who face famine or epidemics. We tell ourselves we are not responsible for the pollution that impacts the poorest of our world. We live as though God will never ask us how we treated this world.

³ Donald McKim, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*, (Westminster John Knox Press; 2008).

We must remember our place. We must remember we are sinners desperately in need of God's grace and we need God's help in learning to care for creation. We must remember that God always gives blessings, the privileges we enjoy, with a purpose.

For an Biblical understanding of privilege and purpose, I turned to a current day theologian who many of you know. Joe Webb has restarted his blog and is writing about these very themes. His words:

When the first humans in the story chose to take what they want for personal pleasure, they chose the privilege that went along with their freedom and ignored the purpose of their responsibility to steward the Creation.

Privilege puts self at the center of the universe. Privilege takes.

Purpose revolves around the other. Purpose gives.

And when we live for purpose rather than for privilege, that's where the Kingdom of Heaven is.⁴

When we remember we are sinners, we recognize we didn't create the privileges we have. When we remember we are stewards, we recognize we have a purpose in the care for creation.

Today we gave away Bibles and welcomed a new confirmed member of the church. These young people remind us that our acting as stewards is critical for their future. They remind us of our purpose and help us avoid the selfishness of privilege.

How do we make this practical? Let me suggest this approach. Take some time this week to consider how good a steward you are of the blessings you enjoy. Consider where you might be acting more like our first man in the temple, focusing on how much better you are than others. Shift your attitude towards the second man and ask God to show you where you need to repent. Ask God's forgiveness and then take some steps to change.

I will give you a personal example. As I prepared for this month of sermons, I did a short reflection like this and came up with one place I could change. I had been making use of disposable water bottles, particularly on Sundays. You might recall seeing one next to my seat. Sometimes I reused, but often I grabbed a new one each week. So, I purchased a reusable water bottle and started making a habit of filling it up to use. That was a simple choice.

Now not all choices will be that simple. Not all will be that cheap to implement. But start with the low hanging fruit and then work on towards more difficult changes. For those who share living space with other, make it a family affair. Invite children to consider their behavior and help them with making wise choices. But, first set the example for them by making changes yourself.

⁴ Joe Webb, <https://joewebbwrites.com/2019/09/09/attitude-reflect-leadership/>.

And wouldn't it be fascinating if enough folks in the church started thinking about creation stewardship from a personal level that interest developed in sitting with other church folks on a regular basis to discuss ideas, changes made, obstacles faced, and successes that happened? Long term individual changes can turn into church discussion groups which can turn into community groups working on creation care. This is happened before and it can happen here.

Let's remember our place. Let's remember we need God's grace and presence. Let's remember the privileges we enjoy call us to fulfill a purpose. Let's remember we are stewards and that God has given us this beautiful world to care for and pass onto future generations. Amen.