

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, today we meet to glorify you. We meet not in the house we have built for your worship but among the creation that you have built for our care and for us to care for. Holy One, what a gift we often do not see; what a gift we do not take time to appreciate. It has become a cliché to “stop and smell the roses,” but with in that is wisdom we need each day. Help us, God, to appreciate your gift of nature and to treat it with the reverence that we would for any of your gracious gifts. It is the instrument you crafted to feed us, to clothe us, to house us among all of your universe, and this gracious gift demands our care in return so that we may adequately fulfill your commandment to “love our neighbor” near and far. May we live up to this holy and gracious calling received from the very beginning of your creative act, Holy Gracious Creator. Hear our prayer and empower us for the task.

Gracious God, we vow to hear the cries of our neighbors near and far, those we understand and those we have trouble understanding, for we are all lovingly and beautifully made in Your blessed Image. We pray for those who struggle in places of war and destruction, those places of corruption and injustice, those places of pain without salve, and ask that we might find ways to be the Body of Christ in responding to these pains as we are able. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord over all Creation, the one who loves us as we are, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray in one voice in all times...

SERMON

I'm going to ask you to do something that's usually not the most appropriate when the pastor is standing up to preach. Take a look around. Seriously. Go ahead. I know many of you do already when you get bored. But today, what do you see? What is going on around you? You should see friends and family, people you have enjoyed, people you have

cried with, people you have laughed with, people you have sometimes disagreed with or been mad with, and you should see an enclosure that is surrounded by sunshine, grass, the trees, their shade, the Wyoming wind blowing from time to time, and an occasional sound from a creature. In other words, we are surrounded by many beautiful signs of God's creation which we are meant to care for, to enjoy, to love as if they were are very own. As God tells us, all of creation is ours to till and to keep.

As we sit in this park, with fall beginning to enter our world, it's an opportunity to take a look around. We don't do that near enough; we are taught, as we talked about last week, to keep busy, to always be productive...or else. But this is a different time. This is a different place, set aside from the busy-ness of the world. We aren't here to get something done. We don't "accomplish" things in worship. We come to spend quality time with each other and with God, and this is a special opportunity. It is the opportunity to spend quality time with one of God's greatest blessings: the creation that we are a part of and what makes us complete. Let's revisit the original story of Creation to reclaim this important part of God's work in our lives and see what this story means to how we live each day in light of this great gift, because, after all, it is a part of life that we as humanity often neglect to appreciate or to treat well when we see it as a tool for our benefit.

Six days. Genesis 1 says that over six days, we go from a void without form to the completion of all creatures that roam the earth. The sun and the stars, the land and the sea, the night and the day...God creates each piece delicately, with intention and purpose, with love and goodness. In other words, creation is nothing less than a piece of artwork and beauty. Each piece is deemed by its creator as "good." But the final piece of Creation is us, humanity, which God also blesses and calls "good" along with all other works of Creation.

What sets humanity apart is the beauty of how we are created. “God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...’” This is something we’ve talked about in the past as misinterpreted throughout time or has lost its original power. But it’s not a passing comment: it’s a calling. We can choose to interpret it many ways, but the one with the most meaning for us is multi-layered. One side, according to the New Interpreter’s Commentary, is that we were created to be co-workers with God, to have authority over creation. We’ll touch more upon that later. But one of the most meaningful interpretations I have heard along the way is quoted by my past professor, Dr. Larry Graham, that attributes we are created to be in relationship with one another, just as God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit live in relationship with one another. God does not do it all by God’s self; God calls us to work with God. We need one another; we need to care for one another just as God does for God and each of us. All of these are important aspects to being “Created in the Image of God” that we must live out to be faithful.

But we get into trouble if we take the aspect of having authority over creation the wrong way. This passage’s greatest difficulty is how we often interpret what is said during the creation of humanity. God speaks about humanity’s place in the world, saying in Genesis 1:26: “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.” That’s a difficult word, “dominion.” At first glance it means to control and to dominate, to utilize it however we wish. It puts creation at our literal disposal. It makes us rulers over the earth to do with as we please if we read it only at face value, but, if Jesus Christ has taught us anything, it is that God’s calling often has a lot more to do than just taking things at face value. He often put the Pharisees in their place for that.

That sounds empowering and great, but the story is not done. “Dominion” does not necessarily mean a power trip. When I was young, I was often recruited to work on my uncle’s farm. He and my father grew up with farming in their blood, and while my father was not able to continue the family business himself, he continues to lend his working support to my uncle when he can. We spent many a Saturday during the summers and autumns on that farm, and out of that I learned an important lesson: good farming requires good care. One has to tend to those crops consistently in order to get the best yields. If you don’t water, things die. If you don’t make sure that all your tools are in working order, it will affect your crops. Farmers figuratively but almost literally live and die by how well things are taken care of in their fields and with the livestock. They have a kind of power, a dominion over their farms, but they don’t use and abuse; they care for.

Later, in chapter two, we have an additional piece from scripture which completes the mentality. In this account, God fashions Adam from the dirt of the ground and is given the command to “till and keep” the earth. According to the New Interpreter’s Commentary, this is an important distinction. The word here in Hebrew is “‘abad,” which means to “cultivate” in this context, but it’s overall tone means “to serve.” It is used later in Genesis to talk about a servant’s attitude toward a master, and even the peoples’ responsibility toward God in Exodus. In other words, God is ordering humanity to take care of the gift that God gave us in the earth. “Dominion” here has a reflection of having the power to be the caretaker, not the absolute authority. It just makes practical sense in taking care of something that takes care of us. If you take care of the gift of your body, chances are that it will take care of you over the long haul. If you take care of your car with all the right maintenance and attending to any issues, it will last you many thousands of miles. If you

take care of your home, you will find that you have fewer issues and spend less money over time. The gift of God's earth is nothing less. If we take care of it, it will take care of us, just as God intended from the beginning.

Let's be honest, there's not much in life that we can faithfully use and discard. No one should ever live with that mentality. No co-worker, no friend, not even someone who you disagree with or maybe even dislike should be treated as something to discard. There's no place to justify that in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When we see creation as something to be dominated and used, we fall into that unfortunate pattern. It is nothing short of sin, for we have taken what was created by God's hands and called good and used it as if it was ours to begin with. There's no place in scripture that can back that up. That is why incidents like the recent water contamination in West Virginia are so horrible. In January 2014, a company in West Virginia had a leak of 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol, a chemical used in cleaning coal, into the Elk River. (If you can't even pronounce it, how can it be healthy at all?) This river led directly to a drinking water plant, servicing hundreds of thousands of people, including the city of Charleston. Once the leak was realized, then efforts went underway to contain the problem and to control the outbreak of this chemical. It needed more than just the filters in the water treatment plant to get rid of it. Residents were told not to drink or use the tap water until it could be treated. After assessing all the damage, it was determined that roughly 7,500 gallons...7,500 gallons of this chemical made it into the river, the drinkable water source. And this wasn't the first incident. This was the first chemical spill in a six-month span. Hundreds of people in just a few days started showing up at area hospitals with chemical exposure symptoms, some quite seriously.

Over the next few days and weeks, the spill was contained and cleaned, but it happens all too often for it to be something to just forget and move on. It requires more accountability.

When things like this happen, it's usually tries to get swept under the rug, but the consequences are great. There are consequences to those who find their health affected by the negligence of others. There are consequences to God's creation, when it's not only us that suffer but creatures that we don't even realize. This is nothing short of a sin, for we hurt what was so lovingly given to us, and it, in turn, hurts us. It seems easy to turn away when it doesn't affect us, but it just as easily can if we continue to ignore such negligence. It's another way that we can love our neighbor in tangible ways by holding such negligence accountable to the highest standard. It's the calling for ourselves, for God's creation, and for faithfulness to God. As we see in scripture's calling, we are to be caretakers for God's creation, and this heavy-handedness and negligence is nothing less than a sin toward the neighbor we love, the neighbor created lovingly in the Image of God, and the God we follow.

The message of last week and the message of this week go hand-in-hand. We need to take the time to appreciate the gifts that God has given us in order to serve God and these gifts well. Take time to smell the roses, for God gave us the roses to appreciate. Remember the roses are ours to appreciate, but they are also ours to care for. Sometimes caring means that we watch how we interact with God's creation. Think about how we each have our individual gardens in which we till and keep, but we are also a part of a bigger unit. We as a collective people under God have the calling from the very beginning to till and keep, to treat the entire world as our garden. Indeed, the world around us is something to nurture and care for, for God created it to care for us!

This is a blessing to sit among God's creation and to feel the rushing wind, to hear the rustling of the trees, to sense the sun's warmth. These are nothing short of blessings from God in God's creation. We understand that from the very beginning, God called these things "good" and holy, and we were given a responsibility to care for creation so that it may care for us. It's scriptural and it just makes good sense. So let us live each day in gratitude for the gifts we have been bestowed, and let our gratitude lead us to faithfulness in how we address caring for this blessed gift! Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.