



Undoing Domination

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Brookside Community Church/Stanley Congregational Church
Pentecost 9B – July 15, 2018
Isaiah 11:1-9; Genesis 1:26-28

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Jesus' teachings challenge us not to see ourselves *above* Creation, but *alongside* it as kindred earthlings.

The Logic of Domination

For all of the folks here from Brookside Community Church, let me just say a word of thanks to Rev. Bernd for inviting us, and Jen and O'neil for organizing this.

It is good to be here with you, here “alongside you.” Turn to your neighbor and say to them, “I’m so glad to be *alongside* you today.”

There are about 400 **billion** stars in our galaxy alone. It is amazing when you think about it. The Milky Way isn’t even very big. Every star has an approximate average of 1.6 planets. So, if you do the arithmetic, that’s 650 billion planets. The Earth is home to roughly 2 billion species of life.¹ Some 70 to 90% of those species are bacteria. There might be a total of 40 million insect species. Yet, our science is just in its infancy. Some 10,000 species are discovered each year.² To date, only about 1.5 million species have been described, and less than 1% of those are bacteria. Of those two billion species (or 1.5 million species we have named), almost 60 thousand are vertebrates, 5 thousand are mammals, and 350 are primates. Human beings are but one of them.

While the universe has been around for 13.772 billion years, we homo sapiens have only been around some 300,000 years. If my middle school math days serve me well, 13.772 billion minus 300,000 is still 13.772 billion—in other words, we’ve not been around long enough for our history to be within the order of significant digits.

Despite evidence to the contrary, many of us have been taught to think of our place in the world with an outrageous and unjust logic—the universe is ours and it exists for the taking.

But this logic doesn’t just stop with anthropocentrism. Let’s follow this logic down a little further. Of the 7.6 billion human beings on the planet, how many have access to clean drinking water, a healthy diet, good health care, a quality education, a living wage, etc? A little more than half of them are men. Of those 3.8 billion men, how many of us are white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, Christian, American? All of these characteristics are things that I share with most of our national leaders, almost all of our nation’s past presidents, and the richest man on the face of the earth. I find it curious and scary to believe that such a small portion of the world’s population has believed for so long that the world was made for them. But let us not be naïve, most of us humans think the same way about our relationship to the rest of Creation. Domination, see, comes in many forms.

This unjust logic of ours, our model of society, our understanding of the meaning of life, the way human beings have perceived themselves in relation to the rest of Creation—at least for the last four hundred years or so—has almost entirely shaped our way of life. It is hard to disagree with liberation

¹ Brendan B. Larsen, Elizabeth C. Miller, Matthew K. Rhodes, and John J. Wiens, "[Inordinate Fondness Multiplied and Redistributed: the Number of Species on Earth and the New Pie of Life](#)," in *The Quarterly Review of Biology* (September, 2017) 91:3, 229-265 .

² “Estimated Number of Animal and Plant Species on Earth,” Fact Monster, <https://www.factmonster.com/science/animals/estimated-number-animal-and-plant-species-earth> (Accessed online, July 14, 2018).

theologian, Leonardo Boff, when he described the modern human. Most of us live, he said, as if the most important thing in life is

to accumulate vast amounts of the means of life—material wealth, goods, and services—in order to enjoy our short journey on this planet. In achieving this purpose we are aided by science, which comprehends how the Earth functions, and technology, which acts upon it for human benefit. And this is to be done as speedily as possible. Hence, we strive for maximum profit with minimum investment in the shortest possible period of time. In this type of cultural practice, human beings are regarded as above things, making use of them for their own enjoyment, never as alongside things, members of a larger planetary and cosmic community. The ultimate result, which is only now becoming strikingly visible, is contained in an expression attributed to Gandhi: The Earth is sufficient for everyone’s needs but not for everyone’s greed.³

In other words, our basic model for relating with each other—how we know what life is all about—is domination. When we see ourselves as being above rather than alongside, we operate within a framework—a logic—of domination.

The Dominion Argument

At Brookside Church, we’ve been wrestling lately with our ability to own up to the fact the Bible has been used to justify violence. When it comes to our interpretation of the world, our relationship to Creation, the way we think about salvation, and how we understand what it means to follow Jesus, the Bible can be both helpful and problematic. Last week, I pointed out how the gospel’s portray Jesus as skipping over problematic passages when he read from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue. That way of reading scripture, which is commonly know as “cherry picking,” I asked us to consider thinking about it as “avoiding landmines.” I argued that if we are not careful with the way we read scripture, we will find that the body of Christ may actually lose body parts.

This morning, I want to draw your attention to a specific biblical landmine. This is one of the most commonly referenced passages when it comes to Creation, justice, and the role of Christianity in the world: Genesis 1. It’s not so much an entire passage or even a verse—really, it’s just one word: dominion.

This entire chapter is a beautiful and poetic description of God’s relationship with Creation. That’s why it’s so unfortunate that when it is read with the intent of asking what our relationship to Creation should be, Christians tend to narrow in on this one word. And this is specifically true when you talk about the relationship between human beings and other non-human animals. God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion...”

Dominion? “Didn’t God set human beings over Creation? Didn’t God give people dominion over animals and doesn’t that mean we can... [kill them, eat them, wear them, cage them, experiment with them, fill in the blank]?”

³ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 2.

First off, the word *dominion* is repeated twice. That must mean it was important to the scribe or scribes that used it. But that should never, ever, trump what God said about Creation at every step along the way, “It is good.” For God to declare these things to be good, especially animal life, even before human beings existed, implies that they are valuable in their own right—that God delights in them. As Jewish scholar, Roberta Kalechofsky points out, “this substantiates the view that animals were regarded as integral subjects in their own right. God’s [expressed] delight in these creations... does not reflect a god who created animal life to be in bondage.”⁴

Carol J. Adams, arguably one of the most important feminist writers today and author of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, says, “The more the word *dominion* is broken away from [the context of this poem of beloved relationship in] Genesis 1, the more likely it is that what one is defending is a broken relationship between humans and other animals and the world they inhabit.”⁵

Even more, what is interesting is that while the word *radah*, which we translate as *dominion*, is mentioned twice in verse 28, in the very following verse (Genesis 1:29), God says, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.” In other words, whatever *dominion* humans have been granted over animals, it doesn’t involve eating them. Even more, if we’re going to be using this passage to understand our relationship with Creation, we must be constrained first and foremost by our reverence for the fact that God took delight in what God created. God said, “It is good.”

I mean, think about it.

“It is good,” so we are justified in separating a baby calf from its mother so we can have her milk. “It is good,” so it must be okay for us to cut off the beaks of chickens. “It is good,” so we can feel innocent when we pay someone to rip into their flesh in order to prepare our dinner, knowing that most of us would refuse to spill their blood if we had to do it ourselves. “It is good,” we think, because it is good for us human beings. That is the logic of domination.

If *dominion* doesn’t mean domination, what then does it mean?

Quoting again from Carol Adams:

It has been said that if kings and queens exercised dominion over their subjects the way human beings do over the other animals, kings and queens would have no subjects. So why is being in God’s image often interpreted in view of power, manipulation, and hegemony instead of compassion, mercy, and emptying unconditional love? We often anthropomorphize God as powerful, fierce, and angry (if not belligerent). When we are lording over others, using power—it is then that we are most likely to assert the image of God. Acts of unconditional love,

⁴ “Hierarchy, Kinship, and Responsibility: The Jewish Relationship to the Animal World,” in *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, edited by Paul Waldau and Kimberly Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 97-98. Quoted in Carol J. Adams, “What About Dominion in Genesis?” In *A Faith Embracing All Creatures: Addressing Commonly Asked Questions about Christian Care for Animals* (The Peaceable Kingdom Series Book 2) (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), p. 5.

⁵ Carol J. Adams, “What About Dominion in Genesis?”, p. 5.

*suspensions of judgment, mercy for the weak, and kindness to animals get associated with a wishy-washy picture of who Jesus was, but are rarely discussed regarding God the Creator.*⁶

The Impulse of Jesus

And here we come to the heart of the matter. Most of us have had our imagination of God shaped more by this logic of domination than by the teachings of Jesus. The Christian God as often taught by some Christians is a god of domination. He—and this god is always a he—could more easily be confused with the violent war gods of the Greeks or the Romans than with the teachings of Jesus. What if we approach the question christologically? What if we decided to ask what “dominion” might look like—our relationship to Creation and non-human animals—if we begin our thinking about God and humanity by learning from Jesus?

The central impulse at the heart of Jesus’ teachings was the proclamation of the Reign of God, or what Walter Wink called “God’s Domination-Free Order.” It was the creation of a new community, a new citizenship, based on a shared commitment to doing the will of God. This is what many of us have begun calling “The Beloved Community,” or the “Kin-dom.” Kin-dom, I think, helps point us to the truth that Jesus’ teachings challenge us not to see ourselves *above* Creation, but as *alongside* it as kindred earthlings. For followers of Jesus, this kin-dom teaching consisted of a twofold commitment to nonviolence and undoing that logic of domination. Walter Wink called it the Domination System: “An encompassing system characterized by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, patriarchal gender relations, prejudiced racial or ethnic relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them.”⁷

Understood in this way, Jesus’ ministry was a radical critique of the logic domination, aimed at bringing healing to Creation by calling people to repentance and helping them discover what it means to be fully human.

The central teaching of the church is based on the idea of the incarnation—that somehow, in Jesus, God was revealed not to be *above* Creation, but *alongside* Creation. The central quest for communities of faith today is to recover for ourselves what Jesus unleashed, that original impulse at the heart of his teachings aimed at undoing the old order of domination and bringing about a new order of life and freedom. Only then will the church have what is needed to bring about positive change in people and all Creation.

I pray that this becomes our quest, that hear the voice of our still speaking God and take up our call—to learn to stand alongside Creation as kindred earthlings, following Jesus to undo the logic of domination.

—Amen

⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷ Walter Wink, *The Human Being Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 270.

Reflection Worksheet

Undoing Domination

1. Pastor Michael made the claim that “The Christian God as often taught by some Christians could more easily be confused with the violent war gods of the Greeks or the Romans than with the teachings of Jesus?” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?
2. Are you familiar with the use of the terms “Beloved Community” or “Kin-dom”? Do you think these phrases help to make sense of Jesus’ teachings about the Reign of God?
3. What role do you believe the rest of Creation, even non-human animals, has to play in the coming of the Reign of God?
4. The message today is that “Jesus’ teachings challenge us not to see ourselves as *above* Creation, but *alongside* it as kindred earthlings.” In what ways do you agree or disagree with this?
5. What are some commitments you can make to begin the practice of joining *alongside* Creation rather than living as if we are *above* it?