

A Shared Dominion

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Matthew 20:20-28

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Psalm 8

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.

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.

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The Scripture passage we just read always makes me think of Ralph.

Ralph and my mother married two months before I left for college. He was a member of our church and the principal of another high school in my hometown. Even though he had lived in that community of 200,000 people for most of his adult life, Ralph remained a country boy at heart. He had grown up in what he called “L.A.,” not that California city, but “Lower Alabama.” More particularly, his childhood took place on a farm near Faydette, a crossroads in the southeastern corner of the state. When Ralph retired, my mother and he moved there and built a house on the property next door to his 90-year-old mother. For a number of years, Ralph raised beef cattle until he decided it was more work than he wanted for retirement.

It was during my visits to their home, first as a single man and then over the years as Lori and I would come with our children, that I fully grew to appreciate Ralph’s love of nature. Having spent all of my life in cities, I had never heard of a “bell cow,” the one all the other cows naturally follow as they move along, and I didn’t know that quail sleep at night in a circle with their heads pointed out as an instinctive act of self-defense. Ralph knew those things and would frequently make mention of such mysteries in nature. Even though he had been active in church all his life and served as an officer in two Presbyterian congregations, for Ralph, the moments that deepened his faith the most came when surrounded by God’s creation. Every time he told me about the bell cow and quail, even the hundredth time, I heard a sense of wonder in his voice.

That same tone permeates that Biblical text. “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” Those words open the eighth Psalm. Had David stopped with those words we would have been left unsure as to the source of his praise, but he goes on. “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals

that you care for them?” The future king goes on to speak of sheep and oxen, birds and fish, before repeating his first words in concluding, “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

It’s easy for me to picture the writer of that Psalm sitting on a hillside in ancient Israel as he wrote those words. Perhaps for you, the place most likely to evoke such a response would be while strolling along the beach or hiking a mountain, when gazing upon the face of a newborn child, or seeing the mist on a golf course in the early morning. One does not have to look far to see evidence of God’s creative hand, and when we do, we understand how the Psalmist felt and the sense of wonder which he articulated.

Yet his observance about creation did not stop with a description of nature’s beauty, but instead goes on to voice wonder of a different kind: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” The writer is marveling that even with the intricacy of creation, God pays attention to us and, beyond noticing, has given humans a unique role. “Yet you have made them a little lower than God. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.”

The first chapter of the Bible describes that responsibility as God commands the first human beings to “Fill the earth and subdue it, 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.” Those tasks were among the first God gave humans: to fill the earth, subdue the earth, and have dominion over the earth.

It’s fair to say that humankind has done a good job of filling the earth, as over 8 billion of us now breathe its air. We will never fully subdue the earth as flashfloods, tornadoes, and crabgrass make clear. Yet it’s the “dominion” part of that charge that calls for closer attention.

The word comes from the Latin word “dominus,” which is also the root for “dominate” and “domineering,” both of which evoke all kinds of negative associations. In the Genesis account, the call to have dominion has the sense of helping bring the created order to its fullest potential. David praised God because the Creator expects us to tend Earth, a shared dominion.

Our New Testament passage talks about dominion in a different way. It recounts the embarrassing account of a day when two disciples had their mother seek a favor from Jesus—namely that her boys might get the places of honor next to Jesus in the life to come. In Mark’s gospel, James and John make the request themselves, but in Matthew, those grown men are silent while their mother makes the request. “When the ten heard of it,” we read, “they were angry with the two brothers.” Their reaction might have been due to wishing they had thought of it first, but once again, Jesus uses everyday events as a teaching moment. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.” He doesn’t use the word “dominion,” but is describing a misuse of it, even so; a style of being in charge that lords the authority over others; a kind of tyranny. “It will not be so among you,” Jesus declares.

Despite the words from Jesus and David, there are still times Christians misinterpret dominion. In some cases, it can lead individuals to think they are free to use any and all of their possessions in whatever way they want, without any sense of gratitude to God as its source. It can lead individuals to conclude that in the courtroom, workplace, or classroom, or in anything else, they have the authority to think they can act without considering what God would have them do. And, when it comes to the environment, a mistaken view of dominion can cause persons to think they can do whatever they want without concern as to its impact.

Several years ago, I read a list of suggestions that had been received by the staff of the Bridger Wilderness Area in Wyoming. That park is located in the western central part of the state, where the terrain is quite mountainous. Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks are just a couple of hundred miles to the northwest, if that helps you get a mental image of what Bridger is like. Apparently, the visitor's center had a box where people could submit ideas for ways to improve the wilderness area. Here are just a few of the comments once offered by individuals who had come to that rugged place to experience the wonder of nature.

"Trails need to be reconstructed," someone wrote, adding "Please avoid building trails that go uphill." Another visitor commented, "Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the area of these pests." Another guest said, "A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there any way I can get reimbursed?" One hiker wrote, "Escalators would help on steep uphill sections," while a companion added, "A McDonald's would be nice at the trailhead." Another visitor said, "The trails that do not exist are not well marked," while one more complained, "Too many rocks in the mountains." (*Leadership*, Summer 1999, p. 75) It can make one wonder why they even visited a wilderness area!

Having dominion doesn't mean we reshape the great outdoors to make it quieter or more convenient. Having dominion doesn't mean we carry out actions with no concern for the immediate impact upon creation or those who come after us, either. Rather, the wonder that the Psalmist voiced revealed that dominion is a shared responsibility. "When *I* look at your heavens, what are human beings [what are we] that you are mindful of [us]...that you have given [us] dominion." That believer could not have imagined the choices we face in the 21st century, but knew our decisions make a collective difference.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *The Americanization of Edward Bok*, that one-time editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* told about his grandfather. The man had been commissioned by the King of Denmark in the 18th century to lead soldiers against pirates along a coastal area. He set up headquarters on a lonely, rocky, desolate island just off the coast and, after a few years, was able to complete his mission.

On returning to the mainland, he went to the King, who offered anything he wanted as a reward for his efforts. The future grandfather asked for a plot of land on the island where he had just lived and fought for so many months. The island was barren. Why live there? "I want to plant trees," was the reply. "I want to make the island beautiful." The King thought the idea absurd, for the island was constantly swept by storms and high winds, yet granted the wish. His subject went to live on the island, built a home, and brought his wife to it. For years, they planted trees, shrubs, and grass. Gradually, the vegetation took hold, and the island began to flourish. Birds returned to the island, and eventually the area became a showplace, now visited by thousands of tourists each year. The grandfather requested these words be inscribed on his tombstone: "Make the world a bit better and more beautiful because you've lived in it."

Edward Bok immigrated to the U.S. as a boy and came to believe that anyone who was able to do so should retire at 50 and spend the rest of their life making the world a better place, too. In his case, that included creating the Philadelphia Award, granted annually to this day to one person who has made a significant contribution to the Philadelphia region.

One day, while traveling through central Florida, Bok came upon Iron Mountain. The thought occurred to him that he should repeat in America what his grandfather had done in the old country. He bought the site and set to work, eventually transforming 250 sandy acres into a bird sanctuary. On his death, Edward Bok willed it to the State of Florida. The website describing the gardens cites his motto: "Wherever your lives may be cast,

make the world a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it.” (*Bits 'n Pieces*, 3/31/94, 1994, pp. 17-20)

That’s what it means to share dominion, to know that it depends upon each one of us to care for this amazing gift of soil and air, water and plants, and yes, bell cows and sleeping quail. A treasure entrusted to the first human beings, which is now our responsibility. An irreplaceable offering for which the most natural response still is the one voiced by that believer of long ago: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”