

Trinity Sunday – Year A – 2020

The readings we have today each very neatly describe what the church has called “the Trinity” – three persons in one God, nicely labeled for us as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” We see those “three persons” present in the text from Genesis as the Creator, the wind from God sweeping over the waters – or what other translations call the Spirit of God – and the Word through which God “speaks” creation into being. This creation narrative has a great deal to tell us about God – and about creation itself. First, it tells us there is *one* God, not the many gods which other religions around the Hebrew people believed existed. And it tells us that this One God is Creator, Spirit, and Word. Creation itself is an *expression* of Godself.

And if we look at that expression – we see a great diversity. Light and darkness, water and dry land, vegetation and fruit trees, and living creatures of all kinds. And God looked at all that diversity and found it good.

“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 all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”

And here is where we have misinterpreted the story in such a way that we have changed the course of God’s intent for creation. God said, “Let them have *dominion*...” – and we have taken that to mean *domination*. And the two are not the same. Dominion is an “oldish” word. We don’t use it a great deal anymore. Your home, your farm, your land – those all might be considered your “dominion.” A dominion is that for which you have responsibility. Dominion is about caring for that which is entrusted to you.

Domination, on the other hand, is about wielding power over. Domination is control; it's about the dominator's "right" to use, to subjugate by force, to *abuse* anything and anyone, for the pleasure or desires of the dominator.

Western culture's anthropocentric interpretation that the passage from Genesis said humanity was the pinnacle of creation and had a God-given right to *dominate* all the rest of creation, to *use* it instead of care for and steward it, is at the heart of much of our world's present 'dis-ease.' Some of that same sense of "domination" is expressed in our psalm for today – Psalm 8. Speaking of "man," the psalmist says, "You give him mastery over the work of your hands; you put all things under his feet."

But the creation narrative tells us that we are made in the image of God – and what God models for us in creation is *dominion* – caring for that which is one's domain – not *domination*. Being made in God's image means we are to care for, steward, be responsible for the welfare of – all of creation – including our human brothers and sisters. The word is *dominion* – not *domination*.

John Paul II said, "Domination is the use of power without restraint and without regard for the integrity of that [over] which power is exercised. Humans dominate creation when they make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to their will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which humanity can indeed develop but must not betray."

Writing on this issue of Domination versus Stewardship, scholar Nancy Welder refers to Pope *Francis'* recent encyclical *Laudato Si'*: "At times the Christian understanding of what it means to have dominion over the created world has been misinterpreted as a 'Promethean vision of *mastery* of the world' rather than acting as good stewards of the natural world... An improper reception of what is meant by 'dominion' contributes to a posture of 'domination' over the natural world with a resulting negative effect on both humankind and nature."ⁱ

Yes, the issue of domination becomes even more dangerous, I believe, when we apply it to our relationships with one another. Note the words associated with *domination*: *Use of power without restraint, without regard... mastery.*"

When the term "master" was used for those who "owned" slaves – that was domination. In the news in recent days, we have repeatedly heard the phrase that authorities must "dominate the streets." But what we have observed is that when expressions of force and domination are removed from the demonstrations that are occurring all around the world, then the predominant spirit of those demonstrations is peaceful and supportive.

Episcopal priest and theologian Matthew Fox says, "The *compulsion to dominate* is what lies behind racism. And slavery. And sexism. And anthropocentrism. And lynchings. And fear. And heterosexism. And institutionalized violence...Beware of the compulsion to dominate. Beware of where the 'need to dominate' comes from. Beware of the sadism this 'value' carries with it."ⁱⁱ Matthew Fox, "On Dominance and Religious Props," June 04, 2020.

I'm sure most everyone has seen or heard of the President standing in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in Lafayette Square this past week. I have been asked if we were going to make any response to that. Our presiding Bishop Michael Curry and the Bishop of Washington, DC, Mariann Budde – both made immediate responses to what happened there. At least two of the clergy present, one of whom was a seminarian of our own diocese, who were handing out water and snacks to the peaceful demonstrators, posted their eye-witness accounts of what happened. Of course, there have been other responses to that event as well. McKay Coppins, from the Atlantic magazine, interviewed several evangelical Christian leaders and concluded that the President's gesture and appearance was received by these leaders as a sign of "shared dominance." There's that word again. Dominance. Domination.

In the gospel we heard Jesus say, “Remember, I am with you always – to the end of the age.” I have always taken that as a comforting message from Jesus. “I am with you always.” Like he will be on our side. He will be *there* for us... he will be there *for us*. And the Great Commission, then, can too easily be seen as our marching orders to make everyone else *like us* – baptized Christians.

But because the Word of God is alive – because God speaks anew to us every day and every moment – this time around, I heard that message much differently – with the help of Biblical scholar Matthew Skinner. He writes:

“Too often we take Jesus’ pledge *I am with you always* in a presumptuous way. We assume “I am with you” means Jesus is saying, “I am on your side” or “I will follow where you lead.”

The blood of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and too many other black bodies is crying out to God from the ground. So too are the lonesome remains of people of color whom America is offering as sacrifices to COVID-19.² It is past time for white preachers in particular to take another look at the “with” in Matthew 28:20.

Instead of reading “with” as an endorsement of our self-serving ideologies or an assurance of personal comfort, let us take it as a simple claim that Christ is always present around us, calling to me from among ‘the other.’ In that call I experience judgment but also invitation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It was after reading Skinner’s interpretation that I ran across this quote from an unexpected source – Chance the Rapper:

“Jesus was lynched. To hear that word applied to Jesus is shocking, first because the cross has been sanitized in our imagination and turned into a religious symbol. We don’t often think of it as an act of mob violence supported by government and religious authorities. But second, I think it is shocking to hear that Jesus was lynched because it makes you wonder why such an obvious way to describe what happened to Jesus has never

been used in American churches. Twice in the book of Acts, the apostolic preachers say that Jesus was ‘hanged on a tree,’ and Paul takes the old law that says anyone hanging on a tree is cursed to make the point that Jesus bore the curse for us. But it never crossed our minds that Jesus was like ‘strange fruit.’ Once you juxtapose those two images in your mind – once you see the man hanging on the old rugged cross next to a man hanging from a regular tree for everyone to gawk at – it’s hard not to see lynchings as 19th and 20th century crucifixions.”

Jesus said, “Remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” That is a statement of comfort, yes. But today, it is a statement of truth. We do not have to imagine how we would have responded to Jesus 2000 years ago had we been there when he was tortured and crucified; we can see for ourselves how we act *now*. We can *choose* how we act now.

Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” That baptizing means to be *immersed* in the Trinitarian God who is creating and redeeming and pouring out grace on us continually, who is the embodiment of *relationship* between and among persons. And the only command Jesus gave us is to love one another.

May we help it to become so.

- [Genesis 1:1-2:4a](#) [2 Corinthians 13:11-13](#) [Matthew 28:16-20](#) [Psalm 8](#)

ⁱ Weldon, Nancy Opstad. 2016. A Biblical Hermeneutic for Dominion: Domination vs Stewardship. *Obsculta* 9, (1) : 73-81. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol9/iss1/7>.

ⁱⁱ Matthew Fox, “On Dominance and Religious Props,” June 04, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Skinner, Matthew. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5436>