

*The Dominion of Love**

Genesis 1:24-31; Matthew 5:43-48

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If birds could write books, then their story of creation would no doubt read quite differently from ours. In the first place, I expect they would make quite a lot out of that wind of God that swept over the face of the waters in the beginning of creation. When humans read “wind,” we feel it on our faces, pushing our hair around and maybe even our bodies, but not many of us have a clue what it is like *not* to feel the wind because you are *in* it—moving at the same speed, in the same direction.

“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Birds *love* that verse.

Sea creatures would probably still arrive on day five in the bird book of creation—pelicans would insist on that—plus, it makes sense to work your way up from the depths of the sea to the vaults of the heavens, filling creation with creatures as you draw nearer and nearer to God. On that ladder, land creatures would come next—mice, chipmunks, goats, humans, camels—things like that—earthbound creatures that could not get off the ground for more than a second or two without coming right back down again—hard—on all those *feet*.

Flying squirrels were pretty advanced, mountain goats were so-so, but people—well. It was really kind of pitiful watching them try—jumping off rocks, flapping their arms. Sometimes when they slept, you could see their limbs twitching, as if they were dreaming of flight. None of this was their fault, of course. Bird mothers taught their children never to make fun of land creatures.

“God made them that way,” the mothers said, “the same way God made you. Now go outside and fly.”

But day six—that was the day everyone got excited about when the book of creation was read in Bird Church—the day God created birds in his image—in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them—sparrows, ravens, wood ducks, and hoopoes—whooping cranes, turtle doves, mockingbirds and indigo buntings—all of them different and yet all of them alike, with two eyes, one beak, and those two marvelous *wings*—their daily assurance that they were made in the image of their Creator.

This was not just God’s gift to them. It was also God’s call—to look after the sea creatures and the land animals as God would look after them—especially the people, who seemed in particular need of help. Humans *knew* about God’s wings, at least. They were not entirely insensible to the order of creation. Sometimes, when they read from their own book, you could hear this wisdom of theirs as clear as a bell.

“Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings,” they read from that book (Psalm 17:8). “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me; for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroy-

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ing storms pass by” (Psalm 57:1). “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 36.7).

Who could read such passages without understanding that God was a bird—the Great Bird—who had made everything that was and called it good, but who had loved birds so much that God gave them wings? So of course the birds were glad to do what they could—waking people up in the morning with sweet songs, thrilling human children with their aerobatics and pretending to like the gummy white bread the children fed them down by the lake. *Akh, akh.*

Sometimes, under special order from God, the birds made bread deliveries of their own to humans in the wilderness. A few of them even volunteered to become food themselves, when a whole crowd of people wandering in the desert said they were dying of hunger. The quail gave their lives to feed them—but really, what else are you going to do when you are the only creatures in all of creation made in the image of God? You love as God loves, right? You love *what* God loves, because that is what your life is for.

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I cannot tell you how many times I read the first chapter of Genesis before I noticed something new on day six. Here all this time I had thought that we human beings had day six all to ourselves—you know, the pinnacle of the story—God’s last, best word in the utterance of creation. With all lesser creatures out of the way, the sixth day finally arrived.

God ordered a kettle drum roll, cleared the divine throat, and said, “Let us make *humankind* in our image, according to our likeness;”—*yes, yes, here we are at last!*—“and let them have dominion”—*oh yes! Do let them have that! I have always wanted 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.” *Over the whole ranch! As far as the eye can see! This really is a wonderful book, don’t you think?*

Then about six months ago I noticed for the first time that day six does not start there. Day six starts two verses earlier, with the creation of land animals—cattle, to be exact. The text does not mention any other animals by name *except* cattle—twice in fact, along with unspecified creeping things and wild animals.

Now all of a sudden I do not have day six to myself anymore. I am sharing it with *cows*, which I do not have anything against except that they are such dim bulbs, with such active salivary glands, since all they really do is eat grass. Couldn’t God have started day six with *snow leopards*? What is wrong with *antelopes*?

I understand how valuable cows were in the ancient world—like buffalo for Native Americans—one single animal that provided milk, meat, hide and even dung for the fire. Cows are sacred in India, after all. Cows rank higher there than most humans. And then there is the book of Jonah, with the best last line in the whole Bible: “And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?”

Still, it is a real comedown—a reminder that while God may have made human beings for special purpose, we were not made of any more special stuff than the rest of creation. We were made on the same day as cows and creeping things and wild

animals of every kind. God gave us dominion, it is true, but God did not pronounce us better than anything else that God had made.

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”

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In 1967, an historian named Lynn White wrote an article for *Science* magazine in which he charged that the roots of the ecological crisis are essentially religious. The problems derive from Christian tradition in particular, he said, which has taught people to view themselves as “superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.”¹

The Christian ethicist James Gustafson calls it “despotism”—one of the historical ways that people of faith have interpreted their divine right to dominion over the earth. In this view, you do not have to ask a tree before you bulldoze it for a subdivision. You just knock it down, push it into a pile with the corpses of other trees, and set it on fire. Then you are free to scrape the clear-cut earth free of green moss, tiny wild iris, unsuspecting toads and a couple of thousand years’ worth of topsoil before calling the pavers to come cover your artwork with steaming asphalt. Oh—and if the mountain laurel block your view of the river, just cut them down too. The next time the river floods, the banks will collapse without those living roots—the river will silt up eventually, until you can push a sharp stick three feet straight down in the sandy bottom without ever hitting what used to be the river bed—but what the heck, if the trout die, you can still buy some at the grocery store—already cleaned and boned, for just a few dollars a pound. You are Lord over this playground, after all— God *said* so. It is all for you.

A lot has happened since 1967—so much that I do not hear many Christians sounding like despots anymore. The word I hear more often these days is “stewards.” We are stewards of God’s creation, not masters ourselves, but divine servants, entrusted with caring for the vineyard until the master comes home. In this view, I guess, you can still build your subdivision, but you are going to save all the trees you can and plant two for every one you cut down and at least cover the rudely exposed topsoil with wheat straw so that it does not blow away.

Why will you go to all this trouble, which will certainly cost you more money than despotism? Because the earth is not your possession. Like the talents in Matthew’s parable, the earth, the sea and all that is in them are on loan to you, and you will be held accountable for what you have done with them when the loan comes due. “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (Matthew 21:40).

Steward is an improvement over despot, but it is still awfully utilitarian. The earth remains a possession, and our motive for caring for it stays in the realm of self-interest. We do not care for rivers, fields, and skies as divine creatures in their own right, independent of their usefulness to us. We care for them because we need them to survive. We care for them because we will get in trouble with God if we do not. We act from duty, not love, which may not be enough for this warming world of ours. We will not fight to save what we do not love.

So I want to keep going, scouring our tradition for more ways to conceive of our dominion over the earth, by which I mean our high privilege of being in relationship with creation in the same way that *Dominus* is in relationship with creation. “Steward”

is good, but so is “priest”—someone who looks at the vineyard and sees more than low stone walls, hand plows, furrows, and seed sacks—who sees instead an altar laid with God’s good gifts, just waiting for someone to bless them and hold them up to heaven again.

In 1923, in the Ordos desert of China, the visionary priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote his “Mass on the World,” a long, mystical communion prayer in which he celebrated the sacrament of the world. “Since once again, Lord...I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar,” he wrote, “I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labours and sufferings of the world.”

Trusting that everything around him was the body and blood of God’s Word, Teilhard held his empty hands in the air, consecrating the world to God and himself in the bargain. It was a peculiar mass—scandalous, in the eyes of some—not only because the elements he used were unorthodox ones, but also because there was nothing for him or anyone else to consume. He stood on the bread of the earth; he drank from the fiery chalice of the divine presence. In his celebration of Holy Communion, Teilhard lorded nothing over anyone; he used nothing up. His priestly dominion consisted of empty hands raised in blessing, as he offered the fruits of God’s body back to God.²

In this regard, at least, his altar was the same one Jesus presided over at the hour of his death. There too the great high priest held up empty hands, his arms fixed in blessing, as he was lifted along with the world he so loved to God.

But here I am at a Presbyterian seminary, where the image of *priest* may leave some of Calvin’s godchildren cold. How about *neighbor*, then? Neighbor will work, won’t it? And who is my neighbor? (Where is Jesus when you need him to tell a story?) Do only two-legged ones qualify, or do my neighbors include the four-legged ones, the winged ones, the ones with fins and fur? Does God’s compassion stop with human suffering, or does it extend to every creature in need of mercy, especially those with no voice of their own to cry out for help? Who will pour oil on the wounds of the tree frog, the mountain laurel, the emperor penguin, the trout? We will not fight to save what we do not love. Meanwhile, God so loves them all that not a sparrow falls to the ground without causing a shudder in the divine heart.

Just in case you missed the Associated Press announcement, the recipient of last year’s VITA Wireless Samaritan Award was a 17-pound beagle named Belle. She was the first canine recipient of the award given to those who use cell phones to save lives, prevent crimes, or help in emergencies. When Belle’s owner, Kevin Weaver, suffered a diabetic seizure last summer, Belle saved his life by biting the 9 on his cell phone to dial 911. She was trained to do that, but she seems to have figured out all by herself how to read his blood sugar by licking his nose. If she senses anything out of whack, she paws and whines at him until he does something. “Every time she paws at me like that I grab my meter and test myself,” Weaver said. “She has never been wrong.”

I like “neighbor,” but “kin” may be even better. If you think about it, we are the latecomers to creation, we sixth day creatures, who remain the youngest children on the face of the earth. In Carl Sagan’s famous example, if we could squeeze the creation of the cosmos into a single year, then the Big Bang happened on January 1. The sun and the planets came into existence on September 10. Human beings arrived on the scene at ten minutes before midnight on December 31.³ Seconds ago, really, compared

to algae, bats, dinosaurs or salamanders.

In the biblical account, our welcoming committee included “plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind.” It included “lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night.” It included “the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves,” the ones with which the waters swarm “and every winged bird of every kind.” And then of course there were the cows, made right before us, who stood around mooing while God laid us in the manger of the divine image, to have dominion over all our elders on this planet.

What did the babies of creation do to deserve this? Nothing. And yet it is in us, at this late date, that the universe has become conscious. We are the first creatures to articulate the motion of the planets. We are the first creatures to discern the commonality of all life. For those of us who believe God is the source from which we all emerged, we are the first creatures to say so out loud. God may well prefer the sound of spring peepers, but I have to believe there was joy in heaven when the first human being looked at the sky and said, “Thank you for all this.”⁴

Despots, stewards, priests, neighbors, kin. “Lovers” is my last shot, at least for tonight—made in the image of the First Lover, the Divine One, who brought this whole shebang into being. If it is true that we have been put here to live in that image, then the only dominion we can possibly exercise is the dominion of love—without condition, without distinction, without self-interest or secret devotion to any other dominion, including the one in which the value of all things is reduced to their price.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’” God’s Beloved taught. “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven....”

In this economy, there is one sun in heaven that shines on everyone and everything—no matter what genus or species they are, no matter how much saliva they produce, no matter what they have done or left undone. They all get sun. In the same way, when the rain comes down, everyone and everything gets refreshed—those who deserve it right along with those who do not. That is just the way God is with God’s creatures. We are here because God made us, and if God made us, we live by love.

Sure, some of us give God headaches and others break God’s heart, but we—we do not get to make distinctions. Unlike cows, we are here to preside over the dominion of love. Made in the divine image, we are here to love as God loves. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

What does perfection look like in a warming world? Well, you know how it feels to take refuge under the shadow of the Great Bird’s wings, right? It feels perfect, just perfect. So move over. Make room, because there is a whole creation seeking refuge, and you, you are the spitting image of the One who gives life to all.

Notes

1 James M. Gustafson, *A Sense of the Divine* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 87.

2 Ian Bradley, *God Is Green* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1990), 104.

3 Carl Sagan, *Dragons of Eden* (New York: Random House, 1977), 13-17.

4 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2000), 42-43.-