

Servant Leadership and the Earth

Philippians 2:1-13

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The word “character” is tossed around a great deal in our contemporary public discourse. How many times have you heard a candidate for office declare, “This election is about character, about whom you trust, about who will make the right decisions when the going gets tough.” In such usage, the word has the connotation of boldness; someone who is able to act decisively in a difficult situation has demonstrated “good character.” Now there is nothing wrong with this understanding, and I think all of us would agree that human history is replete with famous individuals whose courage and assertiveness have made the world a better place. Yet such a definition is limited: our understanding of “character” should never become completely synonymous with name recognition, celebrity status, earthly titles, the accumulation of material treasures, or even boldness. In one of his last and most famous sermons, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that all human beings are predisposed to seek accolades and to attract attention to ourselves. He explains, “We all have the drum major instinct. We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade.”¹

This desire to lead the parade, to make life as exciting and lavish as possible, has generated prosperity and many of the remarkable comforts that we enjoy at the dawn of the new millennium. Global efforts have produced unprecedented technological growth since the end of World War II, especially over the course of the last 25 years. A number of you have devices in your possession right now which you can pull out, punch in a few buttons and letters, and communicate with anyone, anywhere. You can go to the airport and travel to any city on the planet within a day or so. Many of us had spent little or no time on a computer prior to the 1990s, and now we are all wondering who has e-mailed us since we sat down for this worship service. Where can we go to check our messages?

Technological discoveries have offered a new array of employment options, stunning new opportunities to become wealthy and powerful in a new global economy that seems to change by the minute. This tidal wave of change has swept over us so fast and become such an intrinsic part of the culture that we have not really had time to consider how to assimilate the new features into our daily lives, much less think about the changes from a Christian perspective. One minute we are learning to negotiate e-mail, the next we are trying to understand the ramifications of *youtube* for our civic discourse, and then we are faced with rising fuel costs and the need to rethink our transportation system.

Now it would be unfair to dismiss all of this technological and industrial expansion as dangerous and wrong. The developments of recent decades cannot be categorically labeled as some great behemoth. A number of discoveries in the scientific world can rightly be called advancements. Amazing things have been accomplished by men and women who share a common purpose of improving the world they inhabit—in the

medical field, the environmental sciences, and even in the production of automobiles. Moreover, the ability to disseminate information quickly and widely has done a great deal for democratic institutions everywhere. We need only cite the participation of a broad cross-section of Americans in the recent presidential debates.

Nevertheless, as our global population has exploded, as the machines have gotten bigger and more burdensome to the planet that God entrusted to our care, the situation in which we find ourselves has been radically reconfigured. Much of the blame for our predicament can be traced to human desires and actions, to carelessness and willful disregard of overwhelming evidence. It needs to be stated plainly: we face an environmental crisis. We are confronted with an awesome and imminent threat, a series of catastrophic changes in the earth's atmosphere, a situation that urgently requires us to arrive at a different understanding of "character," a definition that is predicated on mutual solidarity, humility, and sacrifice for the future of the earth that we depend on for sustenance and a place to live. More individuals are starting to acknowledge the gravity of the threat, regardless of political persuasion.

In recent months, leaders from both American political parties have begun to talk more openly about the planet they want to leave to their grandchildren, our need to conserve and to work immediately to slow the poisonous effect of greenhouse gas emissions. It is now imperative that we as Christians come together in unity with peoples of every other faith and background, articulating and then implementing a global plan to address our current situation.

One necessary tool in this pursuit is a theological framework. No strategic effort on our part can meet with success unless we develop a strategy that fully acknowledges the impact of our actions on the Earth, an approach that recognizes the need to change our way of thinking about God's good creation and the concrete ways in which each of us can conserve, an approach that sees us as interdependent creatures rather than powerful rulers. Our model in this, as in all other pursuits, is the life and witness of Jesus Christ.

The Scripture reading this morning is the famous "Christ hymn" from Philippians 2. This might strike some of you as odd for a sermon on our relationship to the Earth. What in the world does this theologically dense passage about Christology, the complex dynamic between the human and divine aspects of Jesus, have to do with global warming? If we look at the passage more closely, it becomes clear that these verses and the self-sacrifice they describe can provide us with a vision of servant leadership, an example that we can never match but can certainly seek to emulate.² In Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, he gives a startling command to fellow believers:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Phil 2:4-8)

There are many rich terms and theological ideas in this difficult passage from Philippians. One of the critical words is *harpagmos* in v. 6. The term *harpagmos* is accurately and effectively rendered in the translation we just read from the NRSV: “something to be exploited.” Jesus “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” In the context of the Christ hymn, *harpagmos* describes something that is quite literally “snatched” or “seized,” a luxury item like jewelry or spoils taken by the victor in a battle. In Philippians 2, the point is specific: Jesus had a unique vantage point from which to exploit his position. God had exalted him above the entire creation, made him capable of anything. Jesus could have used his privileged status to grasp at any earthly treasure he might have desired, to treat the Earth and his fellow human beings as *harpagmos*, “something to be exploited.” We read in the gospels about the various temptations Jesus faced, his multiple opportunities to assert power, to become a drum major for his own cause, to rule over limitless principalities, if only he would turn away from God and look to his own interests. At each and every turn, our Savior treads the path of humility, of self-sacrifice, out of devotion to his father and love for humanity. Jesus had a golden chalice of possibilities in front of him, but he chose not to take his equality with God as a possession to be selfishly flaunted and exploited.

This passage from Philippians encapsulates the entirety of the Christian message and what we as a people of faith declare about Jesus and his relationship to God the Creator. The Christ hymn also provides us with the best, indeed the clearest model for character, for servant leadership. The image conveyed here is a contrast between personal fulfillment and self-denial, between accumulating treasures and necessary restraint, between narcissistic tendencies and consciously turning one’s life over to God.

Not one of us can hope to match the character that Jesus demonstrated through his sacrifice on the cross. We have all fallen short of God’s glory and done things that require Christ’s intervention on our behalf. Yet we can look to our Savior’s actions and the language of this passage from Philippians as the true mark of emptying oneself before God, of becoming a servant leader. This example can also serve as a guidepost for our efforts in relation to God’s creation. God has given us the earth and called us to serve and to tend it.

As Genesis 1 explains, we have been made in God’s image, which brings real responsibility with it. Our Creator has bestowed upon us mental faculties that enable us to dominate and destroy, if we so choose, just about anything we please. In the modern context, we have in a sense lifted ourselves above the entire creation, as our technological wizardry has given us the ability to destroy all that God has made. Stark indicators of the extent of the problem are everywhere. Some of you may have seen the recent pieces in the *New York Times* about the pollution problems in China and the terrible toll they are taking on the poor, and the fact that much of the suffering can be traced to the production of luxury items in the rural areas of China, mostly for American consumption. In Greenland, scientists are concerned about the melting ice masses and the repercussions if this leads to a dangerous rise in sea levels around the world. Many experts warn that immediate adjustments are needed if we are to stem the current tide.

We can seek all manner of earthly treasures, no matter what the cost to the planet we inhabit. We have the capability to burn through fuels and consume other natural

resources at a rapid rate, especially now that the global population has exploded. Throughout the ages, we have often thought of ourselves as distinctively other, set apart from the rest of creation. Such an assumption can be traced, at least in part, to a particular interpretation of the creation stories in Genesis 1 as giving humanity unbridled mastery over the planet. Yet the original command “to subdue” the Earth and “have dominion over it” in Genesis 1:28 meant something quite specific for the struggling residents of ancient Israel, as they sought to till the land and carve out a life for themselves on rocky soil, among hostile nations.

In our present context, it has become necessary for us to view this language through a different lens, to see ourselves as guardians and preservers of the Earth, as opposed to conquerors of it. While we have the freedom to exploit our dwindling resources, it has become necessary to change the paradigm, to recognize that God’s good creation is not *harpagmos*, not a resource that can be continually exploited with little or no thought for the future. As the pioneering marine biologist Rachel Carson has explained our relationship to the planet, “The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery, not over nature but of ourselves.”

As we look outside on this wondrous Sunday morning, we pause to recognize that a new reality has emerged, a situation that requires our immediate and concrete attention. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his disciples that “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (12:48). If servant leadership is required, then I believe that with God’s guidance, we can answer the call and avert the current crisis for future generations. Neither the members of the church nor anyone else who breathes the air given by God can afford to be stagnant, to remain stuck on the sixth day of creation, to continue on with the mistaken assumption that we are the culmination of God’s acts, when the Sabbath celebration each week commemorates and celebrates *all* that the Lord has done and made.

One of my mentors, the former president of my college *alma mater*, used to talk every year to incoming students about *freedom* and *responsibility*. He would explain that each of us has the *freedom* to make a wide range of choices in life. Yet we have a *responsibility* to make the right choices, and there is no more urgent matter before us than to make greater strides in the care of God’s good creation. We have the *freedom* to exploit the fact that God placed us in a unique position over the rest of creation, to use it whenever and however we choose. Yet we have a *responsibility* to look at the matter differently, to recognize that we are just one participant in the web of life, and that the choices we make should reflect that reality.

In the book of Isaiah, the Lord has a message of renewal for a chosen people who have been beaten down by the crisis of exile:

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.” (Is 43:19-21)

Like the exilic community addressed in Isaiah 40-55, we join together this morning with all of creation in praise of what God has made. We celebrate the beauty that springs up each day, as the world renews itself by the power of the Holy Spirit. We understand that the best way to glorify this good Earth is to recognize our dependence on it and our need to preserve it.

Mohandas Gandhi said, “Whatever you do might seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.” Small, seemingly insignificant tasks and practices are going to make a huge difference as we commit ourselves to address problems like climate change and deforestation through conservation. Signs of remarkable commitment to this task are all around us, and we need only join the dance.

As always, we ask for God’s guidance in this pursuit. In the words of the timeless prayer, “Come from the four winds, O Spirit, come breath of God; disperse the shadows over us, renew and strengthen your people and your entire creation. *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. Amen.”

Notes

- 1 Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Drum Major Instinct,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1991), 260.
- 2 Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 86, points to the intriguing relationship between divine *kenosis* at creation and the self-humiliation at work in the Christ event (Phil 2:5-6).