

Indeed, It Is VERY Good

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 15, 2017 ~ ~ Stewardship Season Kick-Off
Text: Genesis 1:26-31

This biblical text we read this morning is probably one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. It is a beautiful epic poem thousands of years old which captures a vision of how this incredible world in which we live might have had its beginnings. Similar to other Creation stories found throughout the ancient Middle East, it reveals God's vision for a world carved from nothing and yet becoming everything for us, God's Beloved Community.

In considering this incredible text we must also recognize it is one of the Bible's most controversial ones as well. That's because some folks choose to believe, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that this text is a literally true and accurate historical account of the creation of the world by God. These folks believe therefore, that the world was created in seven days and that the earth is only 6000 years old. They believe this poetic text is proof that God intended mankind to use the earth and all its natural resources as man sees fit so any bad consequences as a result of those actions must be part of God's plan too. These are the same folks who are reluctant to acknowledge climate change is real and, if they do acknowledge it, they see it as part of God's plan and

therefore not something to be used as a basis for making decisions about how the natural resources of the earth are managed.

This, of course, is not the perspective of many disciplines of science – geology, archaeology, biology, zoology, entomology, climatology, botany or meteorology to name a few. It is also not the perspective of many people of faith, Christian and otherwise. The stewardship or care of Creation is a key focus of many Christian traditions, our own United Church of Christ among them. Pope Francis has recently acknowledged this as an issue vital for the future of the earth and her people and encouraged the members of the Roman Catholic tradition to become more involved in supporting environmental issues. Buddhism has a deep reverence for the earth as a part of its core teachings as do many ancient religions practiced by indigenous peoples around the world. So, the notion of the care of the earth as a divine mandate to humankind is not a new concept. Why then is it still so controversial? That is one of the questions our own country and indeed the entire world is wrestling with right now. This is no secret. How we have come to be at this point is worthy of our consideration if we are ever to find a way to move forward in spite of such fundamental differences on such a vital issue. I think much of the controversy comes down to these verses we read a few moments. Specifically, it comes down to two words in those verses: dominion and good.

Dominion is part of the description of God's creating humankind in God's image: "Let us make humankind in our own image ... let them have dominion ... over the earth." "Dominion" means to have supreme authority over something or someone. Webster's Dictionary goes so far as to define dominion as conveying the sense of absolute ownership, of complete power over something. And for some folks, that's all they need to hear. They believe God gave humans absolute power, absolute ownership of the earth and everything in it to use as those humans see fit. This is why the earliest European settlers in what became the United States of America saw nothing wrong in clear-cutting the vast forests they encountered here in order to create towns and farms. They saw nothing wrong with hunting beavers and all sorts of animals to near extinction because their pelts became so valuable for trade in Europe. They even saw no harm in killing off the native peoples they found here when it became obvious that the native belief the earth could be owned by no one because it belonged to everyone would be a major hindrance to their plans for relentless expansion. After all, hadn't God given them dominion – control – over everything? Isn't that what the Bible said? Yes ... and no.

The thing is, there is more than one way to understand dominion and what it means in this key biblical text. Some interesting scholarship on this topic has been done as part of the

Theology of Work Project (2013) which you can find online. The argument they present is that the concept of exercising dominion can only be fully understood when we realize that we humans, who were created in God's image, are functioning in this role as God's representatives and not for our own selfish interests. We are responsible to God for what we do in relation to the earth and everything in it. It is God to whom we are accountable for how we manage the care of the earth and the development of her resources. We are to mirror God and how God would act if it was God's own self caring for Creation. God and God's actions are to be our blueprint for action in our dominion over the earth, not our plans and desires. Simply put, we are to see the earth, treat the earth, love the earth as God loved it into being in the first place.

We are to love the earth as God loves the earth and how is that? That's where that second word I mentioned comes in – good. "God saw everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good." Indeed, it was very good. Think about that for a moment. Creation as God formed it was already very good. God was satisfied with it as God created it. It was already very good, everything God wanted it to be, everything God thought his human creations needed it to be. So, that means it was humans who created air pollution and water pollution as the industrial revolution of the last 200 hundred years took hold, not God. It was humans who hunted some animals to extinction. It was

humans who decided that God's natural systems of insect and weed control weren't good enough so humans created toxic chemicals to control pests increasing human health problems to alarming levels in the process. All because humans decided that what God thought was already very good just wasn't good enough. Hmmm...

Now am I saying that God never intended for humans to develop and grow and achieve bigger and greater things as they learned to use the gifts God gave them? No. Of course not. The human capacity for intellectual growth and ingenuity is a part of what makes us human, part of God's ever evolving blessings gifted to us. What I am saying is that along with the gift of the ability to do ever more amazing things comes the responsibility for doing them wisely and in a way that honors God's entrusting us with his most precious gift of the Creation itself. Remember, we are accountable to God for what we do. We are responsible to God for treasuring the gift of Creation as God treasures it.

And this is where *Miss Rumphius* needs to enter our conversation. Miss Rumphius gets this very basic notion that we are responsible for what happens in the world around us. We are accountable to God and to our fellow humans, our fellow creatures on this wonderful, magnificent big blue ball floating in an endless universe we call home. Miss Rumphius gets exactly what God expects of us as caretakers of Creation. She learned it

from her grandfather, remember? She told him she wanted to do two things: visit faraway places and live beside the sea when she was older. He told her she must do a third thing too. What was it? (pause) “You must do something to make the world more beautiful.” She promised him she would even though she had no idea how to do it. Then what happened? She did grow up and she did travel to far away places and eventually she returned to live beside the sea. She planted a garden and the next spring she realized the wind and the birds had taken the seeds from her garden of lupines and spread them around the island where she lived. That’s when she had a wonderful idea. That’s when she realized she had figured out one way she could make the world more beautiful. What did she do? (pause) She scattered lupine seeds all around the island and the following spring the beautiful flowers were blooming everywhere. She had done the third thing she promised her grandfather she would do – she had made the world more beautiful.

God’s words of love for the earth – “Indeed it is VERY good” must be our guiding light as we live our lives in the midst of God’s Creation. God always meant for us to follow the example of people like Miss Rumphius and that mandate is that we “must do something to make the world more beautiful.” More beautiful. More healthy. More ready for the next generation following us to pick up where we leave off in our efforts to make the world more

beautiful. *This* is what God meant when God talked about humans and dominion. God entrusted us, all of human kind, with the sacred task and responsibility of doing something to make the world more beautiful. God never intended us to dominate the world and everything in it that God already thought was very good. We are to cherish the world as God gifted it to us. We are to treasure it as God treasured it and treasures it still.

Now that is quite a task, that's for sure. And it won't be easy. But, like my dad always said, something worth doing is rarely simple or easy. The thing is, the task of cherishing Creation instead of dominating it is so enormous it is almost impossible to know where to begin. Almost. This church is in fact already tackling this problem in a very real way – our pollinator gardens project. You know about it, I hope. You've seen the tarps on the upper lawn as we prepare the ground for the meadow installation sometime soon. This pollinator garden project is an amazing gift in and of itself and I am more and more convinced of this every day. Seldom does any church have the chance to do such visible and important work in its community. Seldom does any church have the opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of others who may never walk through our doors. And yet, here we are doing just that. And this is just one of the incredible, unique ministries of this church. I'm guessing you'll hear more about how this church is touching the lives of real people inside and

outside of the church as this Stewardship Season unfolds. But for right now, I just want you to hold on to those five words repeated over and over again in that beautiful lyric poem at the beginning of our Bibles – Indeed it is VERY good. God just needs us to keep it that way. The work of a lifetime for sure. What do you say we tackle it together? Amen.