

Genesis 1:26-31
Stewardship, Not Dominion
Service Sunday, June 4, 2023
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First Congregational Church, UCC Appleton

We have all heard the statistics. The earth is warming in dangerous ways.

Glaciers are losing 60 feet a year and have been since 1980. Ocean water levels are rising. Flooding has become normal in Houston and Miami. Wildfires are a way of life in California. There is so much plastic in our water supply that we all have microbits of the stuff inside our bodies, now. The climate news is so overwhelming it is hard to think about. But when you do stop to think about it you have to wonder where did we go wrong? One theory comes from Genesis 1:26. Here the Bible says, God made us in God's own likeness and give us dominion over the birds and the cattle and the wild animals and everything else.

That word we translate dominion, *Radah* in Hebrew, is the root of the problem. Somehow the connotation we have for the word dominion makes us masters of the universe. We assume that "dominion" makes us the rulers over creation, and we have the authority to do whatever we want. Hebrew scholars now say a better translation for *radah* would be steward. With masterful genius, God made this water planet and appointed humans as the *stewards* of creation, hoping we would love our water home like we love our children. God gave us dominion to tend this sacred garden with affection and care on God's behalf. What does all this mean for our lives here on this Service Sunday? Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, stewards are humble. Stewards are caretakers of the earth. They understand that they will have to answer to their Master. Last week, quite by

chance I met Lorraine Stoltzfus. Lorraine served as Assistant Attorney General of Wisconsin representing the Department of Natural Resources. She was a lead attorney on the team bringing litigation against the paper mills in the Fox Valley in an effort to clean up the Fox River. When I asked her why she did this work, she talked about her faith.

Lorraine Stoltzfus was born into a devout Mennonite family and grew up on a family farm. Milking cows, collecting eggs and making butter were daily chores. Recreation in her community meant taking a walk in the woods. The decision to go to law school was unusual for a Mennonite, because they only use attorneys as a last resort. But Lorraine's mother gave her blessing because Lorraine always intended to put her skills to use to protect the environment. Her family believed that it is our sacred duty as people of faith to care for the earth. The five-year project she led here in Appleton to clean up the Fox River grew out of her conviction that we are called by God to use all our skills as stewards of creation. Lorraine happened to be really good at law, but you may be good at business, or teaching or IT or healthcare. God needs us to use all our skills, and influence to serve God's holy purposes. God needs us to use our resources as consumers, our votes and our voices to re-establish nature's balance. A steward is a servant, but God is depending on us.

Secondly, good stewards exercise their authority with justice and kindness. How we use our authority matters. How we treat those who have less authority also matters. When you get authority, it comes with responsibility.

Lorraine told me that her Mennonite faith influenced not only what kind of law she practiced but how she practiced it. She said many attorneys come to a lawsuit prepared to play hardball. For them, the courtroom is a battleground of wits with winners and losers. Most attorneys are cutthroat. But Stoltzfus gained a reputation for negotiating her settlements differently. She made it her business to listen to her adversaries, even if she did not agree with them initially. This skill helped her discern new ways to arrive at a settlement. Often by being decent, she found she built trust. Sometimes, she even gained more concessions this way, than with the hardball tactics most attorneys are known for. Her faith informed the way she practiced law.

I am often puzzled at the ferociousness of some people who proclaim to be Christian. They wear their faith as a banner. I know we may not agree on issues; that's no surprise. But I am perplexed at their ferociousness. Sometimes it feels like for them, the ends justify the means, and that's definitely in the Bible. The Bible I read would lead you to expect that faith would smooth their rough edges and allow them to listen to others.

Finally, the Bible says we can't wait. This mandate to care for the earth is in the first chapter of scripture. It's a ground rule for human existence. We feel a sense of urgency because the science tells us things are bad. But the Bible always points toward action. It's a story of people who don't talk about faith as much as they live it.

On Service Sunday we don't talk about faith. We get to work. Whether the issue is climate change, or helping the poor, or serving our own church, we cannot afford the luxury of feeling overwhelmed. We start where we are. As we work today on these projects, let's talk about what else we could do. As we roll up our sleeves and get to work let's plan other projects for the summer. God never expected us to solve the world's problems. That's God's job. But God does expect us to do what we can, here and now. So, let's get started.