

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, June 6, 2021
Second Sunday after Pentecost

"What Humans' 'Stewardship' Has Meant for Species Diversity"¹

June 13, 2021

Second of three sermons in a series entitled:

"Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation"²



¹ This message was inspired by the following publication:

Prof. Larry Rasmussen, "Adam, Where Are You" in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1996), 227-244.

² "Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation!" was the theme of the World Council of Churches Seventh Assembly in Canberra, Australia, 1991.

[Last week, we examined the theological concept of 'dominion' and how it shaped our destructive relationship with the Earth. This week, we follow the evolution of theological thought from 'dominion' to that of 'stewardship'. Though 'stewardship' is more progressive and one might say 'enlightened', it is nonetheless woefully inadequate. Next week, Matt Deen will speak to us about 'discipleship' and thus present a theological paradigm that will change the way we think about our Earth and thus change again *for the better* our relationship with God.]

I would like to begin with some questions, and they are ones with which I am struggling. *How comfortable are you believing that a tree is as worthy to live as you?*



I asked myself that question yesterday as I discussed with my father-in-law some landscaping I may need to do to prevent the downing of power lines to my home come winter. *How many of you are comfortable considering that a deer is as worthy to live as you?*



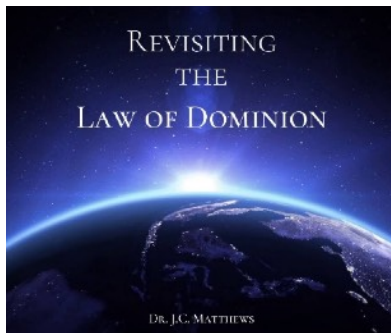
I asked this question this morning as I drove my car north on the highway passing quite a few deer carcasses on the road. What I am basically asking is *'How many of you believe that human life is inherently more valuable than other forms of plant and animal life?'* You see, I am starting to consider the fact that it may very well be possible that a seminal theological belief that we commonly share as human beings is that which is causing us to commit the sin of ecocide.



This morning, I am almost going to preach a sermon I do not and cannot yet believe. That may seem very strange declaration for a preacher to make. In fact, it makes me a consummate hypocrite. But, I want to be honest with you. I am on a journey. And so are all of you with me. We are on a journey. Part of the Christian journey is to recognize sin, repent from that sin, and thereby enjoy life anew. So, I propose that we all share a collective belief that causes us to sin against God and

God's Creation. From this sin we must repent. And after our repentance, we can strive to live anew. I do not yet believe what I am about to preach. But, I desperately want to. I am going to preach about where I want to be, rather than where I am now.

Let us recall last week what we said about 'dominion'.



The theological concept of 'dominion' states that within the created order, humans are the pinnacle and thus are 'exceptional'. Following on this understanding, 'dominion' understands that humans are to rule or to master the Earth. Because of the connotations associated with 'dominate' and 'subdue', it is pretty easy to identify the violence, and thus the destructive consequences, that such a doctrine through us has had on our Earth.



Following the doctrine of 'dominion', the doctrine of 'stewardship' evolved to clarify humans' relationship with the Creation. The word 'stewardship' has far more benevolent connotations than 'dominion', does it not? When I think of the word 'stewardship', the phrase 'taking care of' comes to mind. 'Stewardship' sounds nice. It sounds kind. It sounds sensitive. Stewardship sounds responsible. Even ethical. In fact, stewardship, the concept whereby we take care of what belongs to *us*³, sounds so positive that I am currently planning a 'stewardship' campaign for our church of which we wish to take care.



Yet, there is a deep problem with 'stewardship'. Since we have moved from a concept of dominion to stewardship, I see the Earth's condition further deteriorating and the climate increasingly changing. I wonder if my grandchildren will ever see the animals in Africa my children saw when they lived there. I wonder aloud if 'stewardship' is actually just a wolf in sheep's clothing.

³ Note, the Earth does not belong to us. It belongs to God! The concept of stewardship, if we take it at its word, ought to connote that we do not own the Earth. No. The Earth is God's.



Is stewardship just a kind-ler, gentler sounding relationship that actually masks a continued relationship of domination and subjugation?

‘Stewardship’ of the Earth has the same problem as ‘dominion’ of the Earth. Both doctrines share a theological assumption that fundamentally values human life more than other life. I confess to you I share this belief – and I am not sure I can ever ‘unbelieve’ it. I do not know if you can either. Dominion and stewardship as doctrines share another theological assumption that derives from the first: that humans are exceptional in their capacity to care for Creation as God’s specially made creatures.

As a historian, I see three flaws these two theological assumptions share.



First, the Earth is about 4.5 billion years old. Life began about 3.4 billion years ago. Humans have been on the scene only for some 800,000 years – “just yesterday in the twinkling of the Creator’s eye. It has been shocking and frightening for us that the human species has been able to threaten the very foundations of life on our planet in only 200 years since modern industrialization began. So, where do we belong in the Creator’s purpose?”⁴ If we were supposed to care for Creation, why did humans come on the geological and ecological scene only at the end of it? Talk about being late to work!



The second is that history has shown that humans have been profoundly ignorant about other life forms. As I learn about how ants and trees communicate using pheromones, I realize that ants and trees are just as wonderfully made as I.⁵

As I learn about how birds navigate during migration, using some kind of

⁴ Point 16 of a number of points NOT included due to their contentious nature in Section 1 of a document discussed and adopted at the World Council of Churches General Assembly in Canberra, Australia, 1991. Found in: Prof. Larry Rasmussen, “Adam, Where Are You” in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1996), 234.

⁵ Ant Keepers, “How Do Ants Communicate?”, found at:

<https://www.antkeepers.com/facts/ants/communication/>, accessed June 13, 2021.

Richard Grant, Do Trees Talk to Each Other: A Controversial German Forester Says Yes, and His Ideas Are Shaking Up the Scientific Work, *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2018. Found at:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>, accessed June 13, 2021.

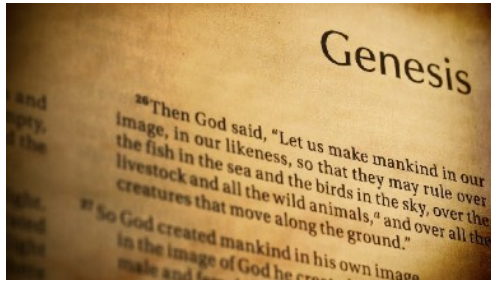
mysterious global positioning system imprinted in their brains, I realize that human beings may not be superior.⁶ As I learn about how groups of whales (much like humans) have traditions separate from other species – that is, they have cultures, complete with songs and language - I realize that humans are profoundly ignorant.⁷ As I learn that animals mourn, especially dogs, elephants, and even birds, I realize that they have the capacity to love and grieve. Of course, all these questions lead us to ask: What is a soul? Do humans possess souls any more than plants and animals? And, who and what are part of God’s salvific plan? I cannot hope to answer any these questions now in this message. I will not try.



Third and finally, humans have historically demonstrated that they have little or no unique capacity, nor inclination, to care for God’s Creation as God’s specially made creatures. In fact, precisely the opposite has proved to be true. We have in fact proved to be uniquely gifted at destroying, not caring for, that of which God entrusted us to be stewards.

⁶ Caryl-Sue, “How Do Birds Navigate?”, *National Geographic Society*, August 22, 2013. Found at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/how-do-birds-navigate/>, accessed, June 13, 2021.

⁷ Barbara King, “Are Whales and Dolphins Cultural Beings?” National Public Radio and *Cosmos & Culture*, August 6, 2015. Found at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2015/08/06/429862292/are-whales-and-dolphins-cultural-beings>, accessed June 13, 2021.



I can only conclude from a historical perspective that the reason why there has been no improvement in reversing the climate crisis is because humans in general, and Christians in particular, share a theological assumption that human beings are superior to other life forms in God's sight. The gifted scholar and theologian, Matt Deen, once asked, "If humans are the uniquely capacitated bearers of God's image, how then can they *not* privilege their own learnings and abilities as representing the highest of all creaturely potential?"⁸ And I ask, "If we view ourselves as the pinnacle of God's Creation, how can we possibly treasure, preserve, and be stewards of that which is considered to be inferior to us?"



⁸ Matthew Deen, e-mailed document to Scott Couper discussing outline and theses for this sermon series, May 21, 2021.

Friends, I have no answers today. Please, journey with me and Matt, as we continue this series and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us what our relationship with God and God's Creation should be.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen!"