

Weekend of the Holy Trinity (RCL/A)
Genesis 1:1-2:4a, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20
June 6-7, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

“Dominate,” “domination,” are words that seem to have popped up a lot in this last week or two. If you’re an athlete or a sports team, it’s a good thing to dominate the field. But if you’re out for an evening with friends, it’s **not** a good thing to dominate the conversation. It’s a reason to rejoice when good dominates evil – but it’s bad for one person or one nation to dominate another.

In the first lesson from Genesis we read:

*Then said said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have **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.” (Genesis 1:26)*

“... let them have **dominion**....” Same Latin root as “dominate” and “domination”: *dominus*, “lord.”

Unfortunately over the course of Jewish and Christian history that holy commission has been taken as permission to “lord it over” the creation, take what we want from Mother Earth, returning nothing, using plants, animals, forests, the sea, the air, for our own greedy purposes and without concern for the well-being of those gifts of God or for generations that will come after us. *The Message* paraphrase is clearer about God’s loving intent:

*God spoke: Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature
So they can **be responsible** for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,
and, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of the Earth.”*

... So we can be **responsible**. If we’re **truly** reflecting God’s nature, that responsibility will be discharged in love.

There’s another holy commission, “the Great Commission,” in today’s Gospel. Before I read it to you again, though, let me share a little Bible study news note. In St. Matthew’s Gospel,

Jesus doesn't pass through any locked doors, isn't the stranger on the road to Emmaus, doesn't reveal Himself in the breaking of the bread, doesn't whip up breakfast on the beach. Instead, He meets His friends as promised in Galilee, where their ministry started. There the risen Lord makes a great pronouncement and sends His friends on a great mission. How **fitting** that Jesus, their beloved rabbi, who in St. Matthew's Gospel is most of all the teacher par excellence, should make a final mini-sermon the centerpiece of His post-resurrection/pre-ascension appearance. He says, amazingly:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

Wow! The risen Lord continues with the Great Commission:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:19-20a)

Just like the Creator's invitation for humanity to "have dominion" over the creation has been misinterpreted and caused harm, so at times has the Great Commission run amok. The part about **teaching** and (read between the lines) **living out** what Jesus has commanded has sometimes sadly gotten lost in the shuffle – at least the part about loving our neighbor as ourselves. At sad junctures in history, Christian evangelizers gave pagans the choice between baptism and death. (That also was the unhappy choice given to Jews subjected to the Spanish Inquisition, around the time Columbus sailed to America.) I once heard a story about European missionaries who cut off the foot of those who refused to be baptized as an enduring sign of their failure to accept the true faith. In this hemisphere, part of evangelizing indigenous peoples has been to attempt to erase their culture in a bid to "civilize" them. Some historians liken the establishment of the California missions by Junipero Serra as a form of slavery. "Pie in the sky by and by" was convenient theology to teach the Africans enslaved in this land, telling the lie that

slavery in this life wasn't so bad, wasn't anything to escape from, because of the salvation that lay beyond death. Many Native Americans still suffer from their tribal loss of identity, partly attributable to the missionary practice of separating children from their families and sending them to boarding school to Westernize them.

"Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind." The demonstrations in the wake of George Floyd's tragic killing a couple weeks ago are protesting the effects of four centuries of human bondage and degradation on this continent. Our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton sent our ELCA pastors a beautiful and prophetic sermon to share this Trinity weekend. We don't have technical capability to include it in this livestream, but you'll be able to access it on YouTube or through the ELCA website. She points out that God making humankind in God's image means that every single human being is made in God's image. As people of faith we are to recognize God's face in every human face. We are to treat every human's life as sacred, precious to the Creator. We are to stand up for each other. We are to use our power to help the powerless. We are to use our voice to speak for those without a voice. We are to protest injustice. We are to use our citizenship to help the Kingdom come and God's will be done.

A while ago Pastor Hank gave me a lovely little volume entitled *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers & Other Servants*. I've had it on my desk, and picked it up last Monday for inspiration, preparing for Council. This is what I opened up to, without using the table of contents, index, anything. (I think it was a **God**-incidence, not just a **co**-incidence!)

An ancient saying suggested that there are two wings by which we rise, one being personal piety and the other community charity. No one can fly by flapping only one wing. It is impossible to be sincere in our worship of God without expecting to do the will of God. It is equally impossible to do the full will of God without the guidance and empowerment of a vital personal relationship with God. As Allan Hunter has said, "**Those who picket should also pray, and those who pray should also picket.**" The same combination of devotional vitality and social action

is also emphasized in the two great commandments of Jesus – to love God with all one’s being and to love other persons as ourselves (Matt. 22:36-40).¹

The concept of Trinity, three Persons in one God, is a great mystery. What we **do** know is that within the Godhead, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are doing a holy, lifegiving dance. Presiding Bishop Eaton preaches, “God is relationship. Within God and flowing from God... This Trinity, this God, this relationship is outward and overflowing.” By the very act of creation, by the gift of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the sending of the Holy Spirit, our God shares the divine life with us and brings us into relationship with God and with humanity and with the rest of creation as well. When we recognize God’s image in all, we realize we don’t have to be glaring at each other from opposite corners of a boxing ring, sparring with each other, going in for the kill, lunging for some sort of knock-out punch. Our Synod Bishop Tracie Bartholomew has these wise words to share with us from her pastoral letter dated June 2nd:

...[R]eactions in the aftermath of Mr. Floyd’s death have given rise to false dichotomies – either you work toward eradicating racism or you support law enforcement personnel; either you support the protests or you denounce vandalism and destruction. As Lutheran Christians, we live in the tension of an “either/or” world with a “both/and” response all the time. We are both saint and sinner at the same time. We need both law and gospel in our proclamation. So it is that we can work toward eradicating racism and support the vocation of police officers. We can support protests for justice and denounce the destruction of local businesses....

Holding these seemingly opposite actions together requires work on our part – building relationships with each other across what’s comfortable. And that is only possible because God first established a relationship with us in our baptism. Connected through the life-giving waters of baptism, we can listen to our siblings in Christ who cry out for justice and those called to carry out that justice. Bathed in the same waters of life, we can join those who march for change and echo the words of Mr. Terrence Floyd (George Floyd’s younger brother) to stop tearing up the community². As one family in Christ, we can come together even as we hold differing opinions on how to live out our faith.

This is a conversation “to be continued.” Our Justice & Peace team will be sponsoring upcoming chances to gather for anti-racism discussions and positive actions. For today, let me close with the final verse of today’s Gospel and of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ promise:

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20b)

Toward the beginning of St. Matthew’s Gospel we hear the angel tell Joseph in a dream:

“...you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”
(Matt. 1:21b)

Then the angel explains this is fulfillment of the prophecy that:

“... the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” (Matt. 1:23)

Let us remember that Emmanuel, God with us, **is** with us always, to the end of the age. Let us also remember that He, the true Lord, did **not** come to dominate but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. In *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* we sing, “As He died to make [all] holy, let us live to make [all] free, while God is marching on.” May it be so. Amen

¹ Harvey and Lois Seifert, *Liberation of Life*, quoted in Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers & Other Servants* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), p. 180.

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