

From Relative To Stranger and Back
Sermon for the Stated Meeting of the Presbytery of Yukon
Friday Night, Feb. 28, 2014

Scripture Readings: Colossians 1:15-17, Genesis 1:26-2:4, 2:15

My brother has a cabin on a lake near Delta Jct. The lake water gets so much heat from the sun that the algae grows green in it like pea soup, and I don't really like to drink it. So, one June day I took my boat to collect drinking water from a freshwater stream.

As I came around a bend, there, lying nestled on the bank, surrounded by lush green grass was a baby moose. It's large eyes, and long legs identified it as a newborn, and it was beautiful. I felt a connection at that moment: a connection with this beautiful creature, with God's marvelous creation and with God, the Creator of us all. What an amazing, holy moment!

Looking at today's reading from Colossians we see that Jesus Christ is the image of God and the firstborn of all creation. We also see that it is in Jesus Christ that all created things are held together, and even our very universe, are held together.

Is that mystical or what? Well, if not mystical, it is certainly mysterious. There are days when I look at God's creation—like that baby moose, or the wonder of water and land—and I grasp something of God's connection to it all through Jesus, who is creature and God. Whenever I allow myself focus on this awareness I am filled with wonder. I hope you are as well, if not every day, then on some days.

There is also an amazing amount of wonder to be found in today's reading from Genesis. It begins with the first account of creation in the Bible—six days of creation, followed by the Sabbath, ending with this verse: Genesis 2:4

These were the generations of the heavens and the earth, when they were created.

That phrase “these are the generations of” appears over and over in Genesis: These are the generations of Adam (and Eve), These are the generations of Noah, of Noah's sons, of Terah, of Ishmael, of Isaac, of Esau, and of Jacob. Each time the phrase תולדה is used in Genesis it means a genealogy. It means, “Here are the genealogical annals of...”

That being the case, I wonder if we shouldn't approach the whole biblical account of creation as a genealogy. If we do approach this passage that way, then we must see ourselves, the human creatures, described as the youngest members of the creation family.

As in many traditional cultures, Old Testament Hebrew people placed a high value on honoring elders. The Bible put it in the commandments with “Honor your Father and Mother,” and we see it elsewhere in the ethics code when speaking of honoring the elders at

the gates. Honoring our elders is a part of biblical tradition. Which, of course, raises the question: How are we doing, we humans, in caring for our elders in the creation family? According to all evidence, we are not doing very well.

Besides family obligations, we also have the moral obligations that come with power. We are surely aware of the collective power that we humans wield in the world. We can work either for the good of the web of life on the planet, or we can ignore that good and opt for our generation's selfish gain. Opting for selfishness causes us to harm the web of life, of course, thereby putting generations of people at risk, but it is an option we can choose. We truly do need to pay attention to how we are using human power on the planet, and we need to be pay attention to the evidence nature is setting before us regarding the damage we are doing, if we are to learn new ways of stewarding our power.

It is in our role as budding stewards of the land that I want to approach the last verse in today's readings: Gn. 2:15. That verse reads: "God put the human creature in the garden"—that is, in God's creation—"and told the human to till it and to keep it."

Translators know how powerful language is. They are also painfully aware of how translations often fail to express the depth of meaning originally conveyed when trying to render a statement from its original language into another. Therefore, for the Hebrew word עבד, which is translated "to till" in this passage, the meaning goes much deeper. It carries a strong meaning of service. It means to work and care for the land, and help it to thrive and be fruitful. Working the land is certainly about getting our food from the land, too, and so the translation, "to till the land, or at least "dress the land" should be a part of it. But down deep, it is about caring deeply for land and life. Similarly, the term שמר, which we translate "keep" also means, "to protect." So maybe a good way to look at this whole passage is that we are, "to serve and protect the land." Isn't that the motto of our public safety officers? Our mandate is to serve and protect the land.

In many ways, the concept that we are to serve and protect the land goes together with the concept that we are related to all creation. After all, any objective view of the planet's environmental health points to the negative impact we humans are placing on the environmental systems. The time has come for humanity to make a priority of caring for—that is, serving and protecting—this planet. However, success in this endeavor will require real passion for—that is, a sense of relatedness to all creation.

Personally I do not believe it unreasonable to think of our obligations to creation in terms of knowing ourselves as the land's relatives. Elsewhere in the Bible we find imagery that indicates that we are relatives of the land. Check out Psalm 139, verses 13-15, for instance. This passage indicates that we are not only born from our mothers' wombs, but also from the womb of the earth. It must be noted, however, that the people of faith generally do not treat this Genesis passage as a genealogy. Indeed, even as I now make the case for considering all of creation as relatives, it is no surprise that we have not done so up until now.

For instance, the Biblical witness also tells us that each of us is related to all the rest of humanity. The Bible traces Jesus' genealogy, and our genealogy, all the way back to Adam

and Eve. If this means anything, it means that we are all related. Yet, the Bible also makes it clear that we experience most other human beings more as *strangers* than as relatives.

Strangers are feared in nearly every culture. In the United States, we are greatly worried about the stranger issues. We are asking a whole host of questions: How should we deal with illegal immigrants? How do we address our proclivity toward racism and every form of human trafficking? How do we deal with marriages, where we don't even know how to get along with those people who should not really be strangers to us? These are big issues for our generation, just as issues regarding ethical treatment of strangers are big issues for every generation.

The Bible therefore goes out of its way to make a priority of treating foreigners well. "Remember," the Bible cautions, "you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt and I brought you out," says the Lord. Our faith tells us that our sin causes us to experience our own species mostly as strangers. We cannot be too surprised, therefore, that we can easily become blind to our relatedness to the rest of the cosmos.

Yet, our Christian confession of faith offers a different perspective. In Jesus Christ, the Holy One chose to come to us sinners and foreigners to God. How telling it is that God would insist on establishing communion with us, foreign and sinful creatures that we are. How telling it is that God insisted on demonstrating that communion not only by coming to us, but also by joining us. How strange that God would express great love for us and name us "good" as creatures without sin, would not give up that love when our sinful offense became apparent. And how important it is that God acted out of that love to save us from our sin.

It is that kind of reality that must give focus to our interpretation of who we are as human beings living with the rest of creation. Genesis tells us that we are created in God's image. So, knowing God through Jesus Christ, how are we to live as expressions of God's image? Genesis 1 tells us that we are to subdue the earth and have dominion over the animals. What should that look like?

Sin causes us to live out of fear and distrust. If we operate out of our sin then we will think that dominion means going to the foreign, savage land and taming it, so we won't have to fear any more. Of course if we do that, then we will also have the same attitude toward foreign people. Unfortunately, we have a history of doing that very thing. When one tribe bumps up against another, historically, they have tried to kill the other tribe. European Christians eventually tried to be better—we eventually worked on our culture to not kill the indigenous peoples, but to colonize them. Even so, we know now that colonizing other peoples still means treating them as *less-than relatives*—as *less-than*, even, the biblical mandate to care for the stranger. It is time to try to learn how to be good relatives to one another, and to all of God's creatures.

So if instead of focusing on the sin that is in the world that would alienate us from other creatures and, of course, from one another...if instead we should focus on Jesus Christ, who is the peace between us...Jesus Christ, who shares human DNA to show he is related to us...Jesus Christ in whom all creation holds together...Jesus Christ, in whom the fullness of

God dwells with great pleasure...then it is time do two things: It is time to claim each other and all creation as relatives; and it is time to finally understand for filling and subduing the land, and holding dominion over the animals, as stewardship.

Jesus shows us what dominion looks like. The dominion of Jesus does not look like a king lording over others. The dominion of Jesus looks like a servant, washing others feet; it looks like a Savior doing what it takes, even going to the cross, to save mere creatures from destruction. It looks like coming together with foreigners—communion, you know? It looks like love.

Indeed, the deeper meaning of the Hebrew word מלא, which we translate “*filling*” (as in the land) in this passage, is “fill the hand.” To “be fruitful and multiply and fill the hand of God with the earth through our dominion stewardship” is a hugely important purpose for humanity. Filling the hand of God with the land is very different than lording it over things. Isn’t that what Jesus showed us in his life, death and resurrection? Jesus shows us specifically how *dominion* is stewardship. Dominion stewardship fills the hand of God by the fostering of a thriving, relational ecosystem.

And so I am taking Genesis at its word. We do have dominion power, we humans, whether that is for good or for bad. We can see how the way we are exercising dominion now—the way we are living now—is destroying the web of life, our relatives. Quite frankly, it is destroying us, too.

Even so there is hope. According to John 3:5, we must be, and can be born anew—born of the Spirit: for in Jesus Christ we have communion with God. And in that communion the Spirit teaches us, and forms us freshly into different kinds of communities—communities foreign to today’s ways of life: we are formed into faith communities. In the Spirit we are called to become learning communities—communities that are becoming something different than the human world expects these days...to make a difference, and demonstrate a difference in the world!

Conclusion:

People of faith may honestly have a couple of different understandings of what I am saying today. So let me speak to three of these understandings.

1. If you accept my interpretation that all of creation is our relatives, and that we are the youngest members of creation, it raises a whole series of questions:
 - a. How are we doing in caring for our elders, and how are we caring for our relationship with our elders? As a species the answer is, we are doing very poorly, indeed. And so that raises the question of the necessary faith response:
 - b. How can we repent, both as individuals and, very importantly, as a species? And this raises yet another question:
 - c. How can we form a church—a faith community—that is dedicated to learning how to not treat one another as the world does: how not to treat each other, or the

earth, as anything other than relatives?

2. If you are not so sure of the “relatives” interpretation—if your interpretation of this passage is more the traditional interpretation—that we experience nature as stranger—then the Bible asks another question:
 - a. How well are we offering the biblically mandated care for the stranger?

In the Bible, strangers (foreigners) lacked legal power. It was up to the people of faith to insist that society care for the stranger—because we understand all too well that in our history, we (or our offspring) will all be in the position of the stranger at some point. Sin makes sure of that.

Biblically, we are called to welcome the stranger, to care for the stranger, to assure the wellbeing of the stranger, and even to allow God to transform us through the stranger. We are specifically called to care for and to protect God’s beloved creation. We are not doing that at all well. How are we, as people of faith, to respond in this day? Indeed, our own fellow humans are suffering today from environmental degradation. Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren are even more dependent on us to act for them now.

3. And finally, given the power that we have, we have to admit that we do have dominion power over the balance of nature. The decisions we make about how we live are having a decisive effect on the whole balance of life. We, who are created in God’s image, must be the image of God in this place, whether we like it or not. That is, we are here to make a difference in the issues of the moment.

So, for us, people of faith who are aware that we are created in God’s image, what will we do? How will we begin learning to make a difference? Making a difference is something we must do, because in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit we are a new creation. We are different.

Genesis 1:26-2:4, 2:15

²⁶ Then God 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.”

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁹ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

...

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Colossians 1:15-17

¹⁵ [Christ Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

The Rev. Curtis Karns is the Executive Presbyter for Yukon Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (USA).