Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 22, 2017

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CALLED TO BE STEWARDS Isaiah 22:15–21

Psalm 8

1 Corinthians 3:18–4:5

Matthew 22:15–22

I have chosen a text for this morning’s sermon. It is taken from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians:

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of

God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they

be found trustworthy. —1 Corinthians 1:1–2

What comes to mind immediately is the question: what do we think Paul meant by “the mysteries of God” of which we are to be stewards? Along with the mystery of the Incarnation, may I suggest the mystery of creation and the mystery of human life? At the very heart of the created order there is a mystery. Scientists help us fathom the mysteries of nature and the mystery of human life, but even after all the theories and experiments, mystery remains. Many fine scientists would not disagree. As those who are called to be stewards of the mysteries of God, we are to care for the life of the creation and safeguard the gift of human life. In this way, as the Gospel lesson suggests, we “render unto God the things that are God’s.”

This leads me to recall the documentary film “Babies,” which played in a number of theatres a few years ago. “Babies” is a documentary featuring the first year in the lives of four babies—one on the red earth of Namibia in Africa; one on the plains of Mongolia; and two in apartments in Tokyo and San Francisco. The viewers of this film cannot help but express their delight over these four babies. They are all healthy. They are happy. They are loved. We see them nursing at their mother’s breast or drinking milk from a bottle. We see them playing and learning to make sounds. We see them learning to walk. We see them laughing and crying. In the film, there is no commentary. We simply are privileged to witness first hand the first year of their lives.

And yet, there is an unwritten commentary created by the filmmaker. We begin to see differences in how these four babies live. The babies growing up in Namibia and Mongolia are closer to the earth. Manufactured baby toys made mostly of plastic do not surround them. They are not ushered into organized playgroups. There are no children’s books in their lives. They are, in a sense, much freer. They are free to create imaginary play using the natural objects around them. They are free to crawl on the earth away from their mothers’ watchful eye. They are free to take risks. And they have a special relationship to all the animals in whose company they find themselves most of the time, even inside their homes and when they are sleeping.

By contrast, the babies growing up in Tokyo and San Francisco are being programmed for success, and at the same time more constricted and less free. They have to go to the zoo to see animals other than the household cats found in their homes. The zoo animals frighten them. They never seem to get dirty. They are kept away from contact with the earth. At times, they are frustrated and bored with all their toys.

Now I have a hunch. I think the African baby and the Mongolian baby will grow up to be better stewards of the creation. Already, even at this young age, they do not use up much of the earth’s resources. Their footprint on the earth is much smaller than the city babies.

All of this leads us to a question. Yes, it is pleasant to observe healthy, happy babies, but the real question may be: **what are human beings for?** The story is told about the time a young person posed a question to a learned theologian: Wouldn’t the earth be better off **without** human beings? The theologian could not come up with an answer to the young person’s question. In his silence, the theologian seemed to acknowledge that in a way, the earth *would* be better off without human beings, without us. Without human beings, global warming, pollution, and oil spills would be non-existent. Hunger and human poverty would be unknown.

We human beings have not done a good job caring for the earth or each other. Pride and sinfulness, and greed, have crept into our management of God’s good earth, and now the whole creation weeps. You and I are called to be stewards of God’s mysteries. We are to care for the earth as we would care for ourselves; we are to safeguard human life. We human beings are not to overstep our calling. We are not called to be owners who have power over others; we are called to be stewards who care for others. There is a difference. Take the case of Shebna from our reading from the prophet Isaiah. He overstepped his stewardship. He wanted to create a name for himself. He filled the household he was called to safeguard with his own relatives. He even prepared for himself a magnificent tomb on the heights so that his name would be revered after his death. God will remove his him from his stewardship and deal harshly with him.

What then is a steward? One might say that a steward occupies a position between earth and heaven. Human beings are not gods. Nor are humans simply animals with brains. Declares the Psalmist:

*When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers,*

*the moon and the stars that you have established;*

*what are human beings that you are mindful of them,*

*mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,*

*and crowned them with glory and honor.*

*You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;*

*you have put all things under their feet,*

*all sheep and oxen,*

*and also the beasts of the field,*

*the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,*

*whatever passes along the paths of the seas.* —Ps 8:3–8

God gives human beings dominion over the earth. In the film “Babies,” there is a remarkable scene featuring the baby from Mongolia. He has crawled (on the earth, by the way) to a watering trough for cattle. He climbs up and perches himself precariously on the edge of the trough. Then we see all these cows moving towards him. We are fearful for the safety of the baby. We need not be concerned, however. The cows recognize the authority of the human baby and keep a distance, albeit a short one, from the watering trough. Indeed, this little baby has “dominion” over the earth. But his dominion is not one of control and power. His dominion is one of vulnerability and compassion. Clearly, the animals honor him as a special creature. Yet, he is vulnerable, and clearly he delights in the company of all the cows.

That is what God’s dominion is like. God is mindful of human beings; God cares for them, says the Psalmist. God delights in the creation. After all, Genesis states that God saw all that God had created and declared it to be good. God cares for the earth – how can one not care for that which one has created? God’s dominion is not characterized by control and power. God’s dominion is marked by love and compassion and care.

It comes down to the fact that we have inherited two contrasting views of the nature of God. One view, put forth by Western Christianity and by conventional American Christianity views God as all-powerful. God is in control and in charge. This is the God who makes way in the parking lot for *my* car. There is another view of God, however, that says that God’s nature is most essentially characterized not by control and power, but by love and compassion.

These two views are not compatible. Love is not compatible with a power that is in charge, a power that controls. We know this from our own experience of love. When we love another person, we limit our control and our power over that person. Abuse results when control and power displace love. And so it is with God. God chooses to love us and the creation, and in choosing to love us, God relinquishes control and power over us. The lover does not control the beloved, but allows the beloved to be the human being he or she is meant to be.

Dominion comes from the root word “dominus” simply meaning “Lordship.” The dominion/lordship God exercises is a dominion rooted in compassion and care. That is the kind of dominion we too are to exercise over the earth. The babies in Namibia and Mongolia will have an easier time learning this truth. They already have a relationship with the earth that is marked by care, respect, and delight. The city babies growing up in affluence will have a harder time learning the way of compassionate stewardship.

We human beings need to re-imagine ourselves. We have seen ourselves in control for far too long. Now we must come to the truth that we are to walk the way of love and compassion. We are to see ourselves as stewards. I love the old Shaker song.

*‘Tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free,*

*‘Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,*

*And when we find ourselves in the place just right,*

*‘Twill be in the valley of love and delight.*

*When true simplicity is gain’d.*

*To bow and to bend we shan’t be asham’d,*

*To turn, turn will be our delight,*

*Till by turning, turning we come round right.*

Yes, by re-imagining ourselves, by turning, turning, we “come round right.”

My sisters and brothers, you and I need to turn away from a dominion characterized by the power and control and towards a dominion marked by compassion and care. We need to re-imagine ourselves as stewards called by God to care for the creation and one another. Stewardship is not only our calling. Stewardship is the mission of the church as well. By God’s grace, let us as human beings and as the church fulfill our calling. May it be so. Amen.