

The Structure of Faith, Part 6

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Genesis 1:27-28

The opening chapter of Holy Scripture exalts our kind — humankind, that is — and it assigns to us a special place within God's creation.

And God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them: “Be fruitful and become many; fill the earth and dominate it; and rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Romans 12:1-8

When Paul the Apostle wrote to the church in first century Rome, he described, among other things, the breadth and depth of God's mercy.

And so, brothers and sisters, I encourage you by God's mercy to make your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, your true worship. Don't model yourselves on this age, but undergo change as your mind is renewed, so that you can figure out what God's will is, good, pleasing, and perfect.

By the grace that was given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you should, but with sober judgment, each according to how much faith God has given. You see, just as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts don't have the same function, so the many of us are one body in Christ, with the parts each belonging to one another. Having different gifts, then, according to the grace that was given to us, [let's use them:] if prophecy, in proportion to faith; if service, in serving; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouraging; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the merciful, in cheerfulness.

Children's Story

One time Sammy the Squirrel and his friends decided to build a dam on Thornapple Creek. Not a big dam. Just enough of a dam to make a pool for them to swim in.

Of course, none of them had teeth big enough and strong enough to chew down trees — not Sammy the Squirrel, not Oscar the Opossum, not Skeeter the Skunk, not Tina the Turtle, none of them — so they scoured the forest floor for long limbs and broad branches that had fallen off of old trees. In no time, they had all the wood they needed.

When they started to build the dam, they had a hard time of it. You see, none of them knew anything about building a dam. And every time they laid a limb or a branch over the water, Thornapple Creek pushed it out of the way.

They tried laying the limbs and branches out in all kinds of different ways until, finally, some of them stayed in place. But the water didn't stop flowing. And it didn't stop flowing when they stacked up more limbs and branches on top of the first ones. It looked like they wouldn't be swimming any time soon.

Then Barry the Beaver came along. Because he was a beaver, Barry knew a lot about dams. And right away he figured out what the others had done wrong. “It's all in the foundation,” he told them. “It's all in how you start the dam.” Then he showed them how it was done.

What a difference! This time the dam held back plenty of water. This time they had a pool to swim in. It was a good thing someone like Barry came along, someone who knew how to build a dam.

Sermon

One last time, for now, on the structure of faith. Faith recognizes the mess we're in: an exile from our truest home. Faith welcomes God's solution: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the giving of the Spirit. And faith continually expresses gratitude to God: through prayer and through a new way of life.

Some years ago former president Clinton was brought back from the brink. Quadruple bypass surgery restored his cardiac function and rescued him from what likely would have been an early death. Some of the old troubles have lingered for the former president, and his new arteries needed some unclogging just last week. But did you notice what his doctors said? They said the former president has changed his ways. After the bypass surgery, he changed his eating habits — salads instead of bacon cheeseburgers, I suppose — and he established routines of regular exercise. That's the kind of thing you do when you've been rescued from a grim fate. You change you ways.

But this is not just an individual issue; this concerns the whole nation. So First Lady Michelle Obama is leading the charge against obesity, especially in children. The idea is to bring about a change of ways in all of us before grim fate closes in.

In a similar way to the First Lady's campaign, **the gratitude of faith is more than an individual concern.** It's not only about me changing my ways, it's about us changing our ways, and it's even about changing the ways of the world. And that's not too grand a project. Let me spell it out through a set of biblical-theological statements:

- The earth, and everything and everyone in it, belongs to God.
- God has assigned the earth and all its creatures to the creatures who bear God's image.
- Jesus Christ alone bears that image in perfection; he is the true human being.
- By the Spirit, God's children are being renewed in the image and are becoming truly human.
- Therefore, the earth is our assignment.

That assignment is described in the opening chapters of the Bible. The descriptions there are rudimentary, but they have all sorts of implications. "Be fruitful, become many, fill the earth." The implications include the vast array of human cultures, with no two groups in two places looking, sounding, and acting quite the same. "Dominate the earth and rule over its creatures." The implications include agriculture and animal husbandry, coastal development and forest management. "Till the garden and keep it." (That's in the next chapter.) The implications include work as a core human activity and an appreciation of both productivity and beauty.

This is the assignment that we human beings received in the beginning. This is the assignment that we human beings have dropped the ball on. We harbor suspicions of different peoples and cultures, suspicions that too often erupt into injustice and even violence. We run roughshod over coastal lands. We demand more than the earth and its creatures can bear. And so tidewater barriers disappear, along with the protection they afford, exhausted ground resists the efforts of agriculture, and fish stocks dwindle, to name only a few of the consequences. And we turn work into a god, offering it all the best of our energy and creativity, wearing ourselves out on its altars. And we dismiss as unworthy any who refuse to bow and scrape before this "god."

What we miss is that our assignment is qualified by the requirements of stewardship. Put simply, the earth and the creatures assigned to us still belong to God. We are stewards, then, not owners. As stewards we use what's assigned to us, use it with care, use it within limits, use it according to the preferences of the owner. And we always stand ready to return it in as good or better condition compared to the time when it was assigned to us. Stewards, good stewards, don't ruin what belongs to someone else. Stewards, good stewards, make room for each other and work together. Stewards, good stewards, carry out their assignment for the sake of the One who gave the assignment to them.

Our task in the church is to model this good stewardship. Stewardship is not just about being green. Good stewards care for everything entrusted to them: yes, clean water and fresh air and lush forests; but also languages, musical styles, and baseball statistics; railroads, power grids, and sewer systems; hospitals,

universities, and homeless shelters; business relationships, friendships, and family ties — all of these things and more, assigned to us by God — because “the earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1).

And good stewards approach their tasks with the perspective of the One who have given the tasks. So the Apostle writes, “By God’s mercy” — that is, out of gratitude for God’s great rescue — “by God’s mercy, offer yourselves up fully to God.” How? By refusing to model yourselves according to the pattern of the world at large, but instead according to what God intends (i.e., according to the pattern of the coming kingdom).

I love what the Christian Reformed Church’s “Rules for Synodical Procedure” booklet says. When our broadest assembly, the synod, meets each summer, the delegates are not bound by any particular rules of order when it comes to conducting the business of the meeting, not Robert’s rules, not the rules of any other parliamentarian. No, synods “conduct ecclesiastical business in an ecclesiastical manner,” says the Rules. In other words, we do things differently because, by the grace and Spirit of God, we are different. Not the least implication of this is that we will do our best to see to it that each voice is heard, especially the quiet voices of those who aren’t up on all the rules.

I wonder how else the church models good stewardship.

In Classis Lake Erie, we try to make room for and to embrace several Korean churches. We want to value their history and their culture. We want to value their friendship. And their food (but go light on the kimchee perhaps).

In the church, we don’t put just the economically successful in decision-making positions. (Do we?) Because we know the value of a person is not measured economically, whether by how much wealth a business owner has accumulated or by how much productivity can be squeezed out of a laborer.

And also, in the church, we try to have alight footprint on the earth, whether by using real mugs for coffee, by composting garden waste, or by recycling waste paper, not because of some fad or out of fear, but because we know the earth’s resources are not to be wasted. The earth is finite; it has its limits. Only God is infinite and inexhaustible, the God who bent so low to save us, the God to whom we offer ourselves not once and then it’s over, like a sacrificial animal that is killed, but offer ourselves continually, day after day, a “living sacrifice” that never ends because it never dies. And all out of gratitude to God.

That is what we model, and it’s what we work for whatever way we can. But isn’t it enough to do our part and leave it at that? To be a quiet presence for good in the world, seeing to it that our families, our churches, and our businesses are run a different way — the new way opened to us by Jesus, the new way of faith, the new way of the Spirit — without getting pushy and preachy about it? Isn’t that enough? I don’t think so.

More has been assigned to humankind than our families, our churches, our businesses, and our farms. The whole earth is the concern of humankind: from sea to sea, from continent to continent, from pole to pole. Every living creature is the concern of humankind: from bald eagles to bengal tigers to zebra mussels. And every people and culture is the concern of humankind: dominant Western culture, emerging Asian culture, and disappearing indigenous cultures; cultures that oppress women and cultures that champion freedom and equality.

While avoiding arrogance and messianic complexes, can’t we recognize the unique responsibility given to us, the people of God? We’re not messianic, but we do serve the Messiah. We don’t have all knowledge, but we do know some things. We don’t see everything clearly, but we do have a vision, the vision of God’s kingdom. And so we do what we can with the influence we have, however large or small that influence may be. Let me mention two examples here.

First, the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) in Toronto. ICS was founded decades ago by Christian Reformed people with a vision for the world and for changing it. The goal of ICS is to train academics in a deeply Christian world and life view, then to send them off to universities around the world, as professors, to influence students and other faculty in favor of a world and life view that isn’t one modeled after the wisdom of the world, but after the wisdom that begins with God and his Christ.

Second, probably next month, in connection with Jonathan Weyer’s ministry on the OSU campus, we will take part in a movie night. We’ll watch a movie together with students from the university, Christian

students, yes, but also atheist and skeptic students. We'll watch the movie, then we'll talk and we'll listen. God willing, we may be of some positive influence. (And we ourselves may be influenced for the better, too.)

Of course, none of this is going to change the whole world. But it's a place to start. And all so that we, disciples of Jesus, and people in general may begin to see everything and everyone in a way closer to the way Jesus sees. We, in particular, want to do this because there's no better way to say thank you to Jesus than to love the world Jesus loves and to offer ourselves, all that we are together, sacrificially for this world and for the kingdom Jesus build upon it.