

“Environmental Stewardship”
(Gen 45, Psalm 8, Luke 16)

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A Tangled Mess

This morning’s Gospel reading is a headscratcher to me. On the whole, the Gospel of Luke is a masterpiece in which every word is carefully chosen. So it is odd that today’s reading presents us with a story that seems almost intentionally confusing.

An owner decides to fire his manager who has been ripping him off. And in response the manager cheats him even more, cutting in half the debt owed to his master by his customers, in order to make friends and soften his landing when he is out of a job. Then the owner commends him for it, and wishes aloud that good people could be as clever at doing good things as his manager is at ripping him off. And what is more confusing is that Jesus’s first conclusion to this story is that a person should “make friends by means of dishonest wealth.”

In the end, Jesus concludes that you cannot serve God and money. But on the way to that conclusion there is an interplay of honesty and dishonesty, owner and manager, selfishness and generosity, cleverness and stupidity, stealing and giving, that is, at the very least, confusing for

anyone who is looking for a clear guidance in this confusing world. The story is more like a tangle of threads.

Today's Confusion Realities

One thing I can say is that story does seem to mirror the way the world looks to me today; that when we look around for examples of moral clarity, we often end up with a confusing tangle of right and wrong from which it is hard to draw a clear sense of direction.

There was a time, not long ago, when the story of our world seemed much clearer to me. I felt as though we all shared a reasonably accurate understanding of how things are or where others stood; that there was more that united us as Americans than divided us.

Republicans were people who leaned toward supporting law enforcement, smaller government, fewer regulations, free markets, low taxes, tighter abortion restrictions and personal responsibility.

Democrats leaned in the direction of a more comprehensive safety net, environmental regulations, a woman's right to choose and so on.

In many ways, our politics represented what I believed were two valid, but often conflicting approaches to reality. And I felt comfortable somewhere in the middle, in part because I have always believed that there are two sides to every argument. And it seemed to me that the conflict between our political parties was the necessary crucible out of which reasonable compromises emerged, that everyone could live with.

I also felt comfortable because I believed in the modern idea that things are slowly, but constantly improving and that the world was moving slowly but surely away from dictatorships, using warfare to settle differences and from devastating diseases. I thought that the human race had learned the lessons of history and that now, with all of the scientific and technological advances and an interdependent global economy, the world would move inevitably toward a more unified and prosperous future.

But my confidence has taken a severe beating over the past several years. Our fractured politics and the sheer brutality of the Russian attempt to invade the Ukraine and the rise of the domestic terror threat leave me in a state of dismay. I no longer feel as though we live in the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” In fact, today I am afraid to speak freely and show my hand on a variety of politically

sensitive matters, because I am afraid not only for my own safety, but for yours. I know that if I say something that some nutcase out there doesn't like, that there is a possibility, however remote, that such a person will feel emboldened and supported in coming in here to shut us down.

I wish I were just being overly sensitive. But the threat is real. Last week a government sponsored conference on how to protect religious organizations from the threat of domestic terrorism was held in Westfield. Unfortunately, we were not able to register for it in time. But the reality is that this is something we have to be aware of.

At the same time, we cannot be cowed into silence. We are God's church and we have to stand clearly for what Jesus stood for, even if that is sometimes controversial. But how can we know what to do and how can we make an important contribution in a way that does not further enflame the divisions in our society?

Very, very good!

So let's talk about the environment for a bit. The first chapter of the Bible in Genesis is completely taken up by the account of God's creation of the world. And at the end of each day, God looks upon what has

been created and proclaims that “it is good”. Each day God creates more, and each day God proclaims the goodness of what has been created, in a way that gives ever greater emphasis to those words and culminating with the creation of Adam and Eve. God has created a wondrous creation and breathed life into it, into us, and what God has created is very, very good.

And strangely enough, because we are often so preoccupied with one concern or another, we can fail to recognize this. Each day the sun comes up and it rains or shines, eggs sizzle in the pan, birds drop by the feeder, people go here and there about their business and days, weeks, even months can go by in which we fail to stop just to be awed by the miracle of it all; to stop and take a deep breath and say “I’m breathing ?!” or to look at our hands, flex our fingers and say, “My God, I have a body and hands with fingers that wiggle when I want them to. And I’m a conscious of this! And that you exist! And we can communicate with each other! And that there is this power called ‘love’ that holds us together.”

Psalm 8 expresses our awe so beautifully:

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;

- ⁴ what are humans that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
- ⁵ Yet you have made them (*that means us!*) a little lower than God
and crowned us with glory and honor.
- ⁶ You have given us dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under our feet,
- ⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
- ⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
- ⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The psalm expresses awe and gratitude. But it also reveals the tremendous power we have over the other life forms with which we share this garden. Not only has God given each of us a very high value, crowning us with “glory and honor,” God has also given us “dominion,” the power of life or death over the other inhabitants. And it becomes clear in many other biblical passages that this gift is not to be trampled underfoot, but that we are to understand that we are the caretakers, on God’s behalf, of all we oversee. And we are to protect and nurture this piece of creation that we live in, because it is a gift that is as fragile as it is precious.

This is a clear message to us from scripture. But the world of human interactions that we live in is so complex and hard to read, that even

simple truths like this get lost. And we are in such angry disagreement and division as a nation, that we are unable and unwilling to come together to care for it - the one thing without which no one, no matter what political persuasion or ethnic group or nationality, can survive. and that is a healthy environment.

Confused but Clear

And so I will start by admitting that, like many people I am both confused by today's world, but also feel very clear in my conviction that what we do in response to the reality of Climate Change is what will matter most to those who follow us. I am not sure just how we can do our part to restore balance to our relationship with the earth. I'm not an engineer or an environmental scientist.

But I do think that addressing this threat is something we can do together, because I think we all share a sense of how precious God's creation and the gift of life truly is. We understand its fragility. And we share the desire that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy the same blessings of earthly existence that we have enjoyed. (We cannot simply allow the ecosystems through which God gives us life to be destroyed and leave nothing but deserts and flooding to our children).

Like Joseph

You may wonder why we have the reading from Genesis about Joseph and his brothers today. I put it in because Joseph, for me, represents a man who also grew up in a reality that would have been confusing and hard for him to read. But he was also a man who, during the course of his life, was literally crowned, little less than Pharaoh, and who came to exercise the Pharaoh's power over all the inhabitants of Egypt.

You may recall that Joseph grew up first with an overindulgent father and that while he was still a boy, his brothers threw him in a pit, then sold him to passing traders. Much of his life was marked by experiences of betrayal and separation. At Pharaoh's court, he was seduced by the wife of the Captain of the guard, and then accused by her and sent to prison when he refused her advances.

His connection with the world of dreams could have been all his own imagining. But fortunately, in his case, God was present and speaking to him through them and his interpretations turned out to be on the mark. He dreamed that famine was coming and helped Pharaoh's court prepare. So that when famine came and his brothers came to the court in need of food, he was able to provide it.

I find the story of Joseph comforting this morning, not only because it is a story about a man who lived in an uncertain world, a world full of mixed messages not unlike our own but because, in spite of the many ups and downs, he never gives in to the kind of grudging fatalism or vengeful anger or bitterness that tempts us today.

As far as I can tell, there is really no trace of the negativity that surrounds him in Joseph himself, although I think he carries within himself a deep sense of longing. And, even though it is impossible for him to make sense of where his life is going, in the end it turns out that he plays a crucial role in the salvation of Israel, by delivering his family from famine and death.

And when he sees his brothers coming and realizes that all the many long and confusing years actually did have a direction and had led him to the sacred purpose he was now able to fulfill, and in way that restored the shattered pieces of his life in so unexpected a way... he burst into tears of joy and relief.

The Congregation

I raise the topic of the Environment this morning, because the question of whether we are willing to live on this planet in a way that is

sustainable is perhaps the most important existential question facing us today. It is an economic question and it is a religious and spiritual question. And it can also feel like an overwhelming question.

And I raise the example of Joseph, because he was able to face the confusions, the betrayals, the inequalities and intrigues of his day in a way that was free of the hatreds and animosities that swirled around him. And God used him to save his brothers during a famine, a time of environmental crisis.

Perhaps our congregation can be like Joseph. Perhaps we can face the environmental crises of our times and do our bit as stewards of God's creation, without engaging in the hatreds and intrigues that characterize today's politics.

And in the mystery of the way God works, I pray that the day will come for us all when, like Joseph, we too will suddenly see God's hand in the long confusing course we each have run and burst into great sobs of pain and joy for the life of loving that God has given us.