

*The following transcript was offered as a sermon by NCIPL Program Coordinator, Sarah Ogletree, on Sunday, June 7th, 2020, during the online worship service of **Pittsboro Presbyterian Church**. The sermon reflects on Genesis 1:1-2:4 as is titled “From Domination to Dominion.”*

Our text this morning is one of great beauty and fame. If you are like me, it may be one of those stories inscribed on your heart from the time of your childhood. Particularly if you are someone who cares deeply about the earth.

In so many ways this first chapter of Genesis, this passage that we are offered today, presents a beautiful narrative for the work of creation care and climate justice. In the reading of this cosmic poem we are offered stunning ecological imagery and repeated affirmations that the world is good. We are told that humans, existing within creation, are very good. We are even introduced to the concept of Sabbath—a concept necessary to any real conversation or practice of sustainability.

In so many ways, this is a helpful text. But in one way, one way you are likely already aware of, this text is difficult. In Genesis 1:26, after the creation of humankind in God’s image, God declares that humans will have *dominion* over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.

When asked about the work I do, this verse is almost always brought up. Folks who are curious ask, “*what do you do with dominion?*” Other folks use this verse to invite me into a conversation about the validity of this work, proclaiming that the earth and all its bounty exist sheerly for the purpose of human consumption.

I bring this up because the question “*what do you do with dominion?*” is both alive and important. This verse has been used to defend an extractive relationship to the earth for far too long. And for far too long, dominion has been understood in terms of *domination*.

This is a problem.

The concept of dominion read as domination has been used by Christians to explain and justify atrocities—from the practice of mountaintop removal coal mining that destroys both people and place and leaves cancer corridors in its wake, to the corporate practice of toxic incineration that poisons the air and destroys the lungs of the primarily black community members who live, play, and pray in the vicinity of these facilities.

This is done purposefully. This is called environmental racism. And it is all connected.

Ideas of dominion, understood as domination, have upheld and continue to uphold systems of injustice. Ideas of dominion, understood as domination, bulldoze forests, silence indigenous voices, and contaminate the drinking water of the poor.

But it doesn't stop there.

Friends, this concept of domination has fueled supremacist thinking. Not only that humans exist at the pinnacle of creation in an anthropocentric way, but also, historically, in a way that is deeply racist. Do you think that over the years, the typical white pastor preaching on dominion over the earth, thought that all people had the same access to dominion? *The same access to power?* Of course not. This idea of domination is connected to the kind of thinking that leads to police brutality, and ultimately, to the recent murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, Sean Reed, and so many others over the past months and years. *To think that domination is divine is to be sorely mistaken.* The ripple effects of this ideology are deadly.

Beloved, when we have read dominion as domination, we have misunderstood the text. We have misunderstood our call. We have misunderstood our role and place within creation—our relationship to each other and all that creeps upon the earth. We cannot be made in God's image, we cannot be *very good*, and uphold notions of domination.

So, we're back to our original question. *What do we do with dominion?*

Let's go back to the text.

When we look to biblical commentaries we find that God's offering of dominion to humankind, this newly created being made to mirror God's likeness in the world, was ultimately, an offer to share power. This was never an invitation to domination. Instead, God was, God is, inviting humankind to share in God's own dominion, God's own power, God's own ability to care for, and be in the world. The commentators go as far as to say that this is God's democratizing effort.

Power in and of itself is not a bad thing. The negative connotations that some of us associate with power stem from human corruption. But power can do good. And power is necessary.

The creative process that we witness in Genesis 1 is a process of power. God's breathing over the waters, God's creation of night and day, land and sea, power exudes from these passages. This is not the power of the tyrant, but the power of the potter to shape clay, the power of the organizer to bring forth, to birth, a movement, the power of the poet to state purpose clearly.

Biblical scholars assert that "dominion" must be understood in terms of nurturing and caregiving. And friends, there is real power in caring well. There is real power in nurturing—in other words, *in encouraging growth and development*. This is the power that we as people, as humans, are invited to share in Genesis 1:26. The kind of power that sees trees blossom and fruit. The kind of power that sees communities gather at the table. The kind of power that *creates*.

As we continue to read this chapter, we come across another word that many have understood as underscoring the narrative of domination. That word is "subdue."

In Genesis 1:28, after humankind is created and given dominion, God blesses them and commands them to fill the earth and subdue it. Again, though often read as an order to dominate, this term invites humans into creative and compassionate power. Biblical scholars inform us that this word is connected to the term cultivate, and that it alludes to the process of agriculture. They assert that though the work of tilling soil was difficult, the earth was in no way perceived as enemy. Instead, this command to cultivate was an invitation to co-create with God—to work with the soil, to work with the relationships already established in the creation, and to flourish alongside all beings loved and beloved by God.

In many ways, I am reminded here of old environmental arguments. For many of us in the environmental movement, wilderness preservation has been seen as the purest form of good. The thinking being that people only do and cause harm. Take John Muir. Muir spoke beautifully about the pristine forests of Yosemite and Hetch Hechy, invoking sacred imagery, and calling trees cathedrals. But Muir was profoundly racist. He saw people, particularly indigenous, black, and brown people, as a stain to be removed from his sanctuary.

Muir's idea that people can only do harm, linked to concepts of purity, is an idea that works in line with domination and supremacy. I am not saying that wilderness preservation is bad—do not hear that. I am saying that the idea that we as people, as humans, can only hurt the world is not an idea grounded in faith or in the compassionate and creative power that we are

called to through the work of dominion. Siblings in faith, we are called to *relate to the world, to exist within, to thrive among*.

I want you to know that this kind of right relationship does exist. It is possible. And one manifestation that I can offer is called permaculture.

For those of you who do not know, permaculture “is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive systems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of the landscape with people providing their food, energy, shelter and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way.” These principles are used in regenerative agriculture, rewilding initiatives, and community resilience projects. And to me, they feel exactly like what we should be aiming for as we strive to co-create and work with the world.

Permaculture believes that people can enter into an ecosystem, a human community and place filled with plant and animal species of all kinds, and make it better. I’ll say that again. Permaculture believes that by paying attention and nurturing relationships already in place, people can do good instead of harm. When first presented to me, I found this to be a radical idea. The sins of our world—of destruction, domination, supremacy, sexism, and racism made it difficult for me to believe that people could truly improve anything.

But a beautiful film, called *Inhabit*, lit a small fire of hope in my soul.

This film, about permaculture, showed time and time again, people inheriting spaces that had been abused, dirt that couldn’t grow grass—and transforming those spaces into food forests, orchards, abundant gardens with fruit and vegetables and birds and insects galore. And these gardeners, these workers of soil and builders of relationship, always invited their community to share in the abundance. Children, families, single people, the elderly all gathered to eat with each other, to learn with each other, and to sit in these spaces amidst newfound beauty and growth.

I am not asking that we all become gardeners. I am asking that like the brave, and strong, and committed people in this film, *we work with and not against the goodness of creation*. I am asking that we take part in the work of transformation. I am asking that we acknowledge that we exist as a part of creation and not separate from it. I am asking that we acknowledge the power we have, and for many of us, the privilege that we have. And I am asking that we use

that power and privilege to make the world better. I am asking that we pay attention, that we see where new life is budding, and that we nurture it.

The principles of permaculture are not limited to agriculture. Entire communities are based around them—as they should be.

If we are truly made in God's image, then walking through this world should be a blessing on all we touch. A blessing to our black and brown neighbors, a blessing to the migrant farmer, a blessing to the child, a blessing to the single mother, a blessing to the young indigenous woman, a blessing to the jobless, a blessing to the uninsured, a blessing to the elderly, a blessing to the blade of grass, a blessing to the river, a blessing to the microbes that allow our soil to bring forth both flowers and food.

As God's hands and feet in this world, we must see ourselves in relationship, and live into relationship—fully and with love. We must decry domination. We must name the sin of racism in all its forms. We must listen to those around us, those who our lives are connected to in the intricate web of creation and beloved community. As white people, we must listen particularly well to black and brown voices. We must listen, we must repent from our role in systemic racism, and we must become anti-racist. We must act on behalf of all that is good and holy.

I was moved this week by a beautiful three-line poem from Andrea Gibson, that I want to offer you today. They say, “[e]ven when the truth isn't hopeful, the telling of it is.” *Even when the truth isn't hopeful, the telling of it is.* Right now, we are witnessing truth-telling in mass. The veil is being lifted, and I have hope in the ways that I am seeing systems of dominating power being called out, and called back into right relationship. The truth-telling is where the hope is.

Friends, as we close, I want us to imagine a world in right relationship. I want us to imagine what it would be like to live into our calling of caretaking, our calling of nurturing, our calling of creative power. I want us to imagine what it would be to be very good, and to know the world that we belong to as good as well.

It is imperative that we are able to both critique and imagine. We need to be able to imagine a world, a society, in which people and the places they inhabit are valued over profit. We need to be able to imagine a world in which Black Lives Matter. We need to be able to

imagine a world in which we exist in right relationship to each other, and the soil, and recognize the connection.

We cannot love our neighbor without loving the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the ground in which their food is grown. This is what it means to do the work of the church, to do the work of climate and environmental justice, to do the work of creation care.

So, close your eyes.

What would it look like for you to be in right relationship with the world? With the fullness of Creation?

What would it look like for you to be in right relationship with your community? With your black and brown neighbors?

What would it look like for you to be in right relationship with the soil and the air that fills your lungs and the lungs of so many of God's creatures?

As you imagine, what words are inscribed on your heart? What is the Spirit calling you to? What is your first step in achieving this vision?

Open your eyes. Let's live into that vision starting today. Let's claim the compassionate, creative power shared with us by God. Let's do it now. Let's do it together.

Amen.