



THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

JUNE 2, 2019

JOHN 17: 20-26

“WHICH STORY DO YOU CHOOSE”

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

“Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

- Stories tell us who we are as individuals, as families, as faith communities, as a nation, and as a global community.
- At Bill Helfrich’s funeral Thursday, his adult children told stories about his being able to fix anything. Stories of his dogged discipline to stay healthy in the face of a damaged heart. Their stories told us who Bill was in his time on earth.
- I’ve told you the story of my paternal grandparents who were carnies. My great-grandfather, Rattlesnake Pete, who rode on the Last Mustang Roundup in the west.
- Sometimes, though, the stories we tell influence our world in unforeseen ways.
- In the Bible, there are two stories of “In the beginning.”
- In Genesis, the first story begins with “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.”
- And, within this “In the beginning” story, we find, perhaps, the most negatively impactful passage in all of scripture: “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.”

- “Subdue” implies that creation will not do our bidding gladly or easily. That we must bring creation into submission by brute strength. But there is a twistedness in humanity which causes us to perform this task with fierce and destructive delight.
- Dominion has to do with a kingly rule, which humans have expressed with an authoritarian harshness and force.
- These three words, “subdue and have dominion”, led Christian and other religious men like Astor, Carnegie, Rockefeller, Crocker, Duke, Frick, Morgan, and Vanderbilt to use what are now considered illegal and unethical practices to create a model of doing business. They saw all of creation as inferior to humans. Creation—the earth and the oceans, the air and the animals were seen as a means to an end: to make money and to consolidate power.
- Rivers and oceans do not have innate value. They are handy receptacles for waste product. Air, essential to all of life, viewed as a vast expanse to be polluted by manufacturing. Land is not to be cared for as by stewards, but something to be built upon. Because don’t we need another McDonalds, another mall, another storage facility, another Walmart?
- Leopards are valuable for fur coats, elephants advantageous for their ivory tusks, whales beneficial for oil, and birds useful for feathers for hats and chicken wings during football games.
- It’s one thing to subdue the earth in order to grow food in a sustainable manner. Another to destroy it for gas, oil, tobacco, and wood products.
- And, of course, we developed all kinds of poisons in our mad rush to subdue and dominate. Why dig up a dandelion when we can spray it with Roundup. Pesticides for agricultural use kill our bees and their ability to reproduce. I could go on and on, but that would be depressing.
- **And yet, isn’t it an appropriate response for a spiritual person to find all this depressing?**
- Living species are disappearing around the world one thousand times faster than at any time in the past 65 million years.

- This first “In the beginning” story in genesis ultimately ends in alienation. Man and woman are cast out of the Garden, alienated and isolated from one another, from creation, and from God.
- This story is one of rampant narcissism: all of creation useful only for what we want out of it for our own gain.
- And so, this “In the beginning” story has slowly unfolded until it seems we are reaching a point of a deadly ending.
- In fact, this story of alienation and isolation now infects the entire culture.
- In 2017, there were 1.4 million attempted suicides. And 70% of them are by middle-aged white men. They often succeed because they most often use guns. Why is this happening?
- In one anecdote, a man told a reporter, “I have no one. The winters are killing me.” Do you hear the alienation and isolation?
- Dr. Craig Bryan, who studies military and rural suicide says, “There doesn’t seem to be as strong a sense of ‘we’re all in this together. It’s much more ‘Hey, don’t infringe on me. You’re on your own.’”
- Our American individualism, where each person is seen as having a divine mandate to do whatever it takes to “win,” has reached the point where loneliness and disconnection from one another is rampant.
- More than half of respondents to a UCLA survey said they always or sometimes feel that no one knows them well. 56% reported they sometimes or always feel like the people around them “are not necessarily *with* them.” And 2 in 5 feel like “they lack companionship,” that their “relationships aren’t meaningful” and that they “are isolated from others.”
- A recent book, **Bowling Alone**, follows the decline in community and fraternal organizations and associations. Actually, more people are bowling these days, but by themselves, not in leagues.

- Membership in traditional women's groups has declined more or less steadily since the mid-1960s. The National Federation of Women's clubs is down by 59% and the League of Women Voters is off 42%.
- Boys Scouts are off by 26% and the Red Cross by 61% since 1970.
- Membership is down substantially across the board with Lions Clubs, Elks, Shriners, Jaycees, and Masons.
- And only 11% of all the Lutheran congregations in SWPA Synod are growing. Where do you think the other 89% are going to end up?
- Our wholesale investment in this first "In the beginning" story is killing us, killing our sense of community, killing our earth, killing our world....
- But there is this second "In the beginning story." And how could we have missed it?
- The Gospel of John starts out "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God. **All things** came into being through Him, and **without Him not one thing came into being.**"
- Clearly John is shouting that there is a new beginning in Christ.
- Rather than a story about alienation and isolation; rather than a story about subduing and dominating, this "In the beginning" story tells us that everything in all creation came into being through Christ. Every rock, insect, flower, stream, tree, bird, animal, and blade of grass flows into existence through the Center of Existence, the Christ....
- The root meaning of the word *animal* is "a living being" which connects beautifully with this "In the beginning" story. But in the first "In the beginning" story we see the animal as something to be dominated.
- But did you know that chimpanzees, dogs, horses, and other species show evidence of post traumatic stress disorder when they have been torn from birth families, confined in cages and pens, or forced to behave in ways that are not natural to them?
- In Christ, we are one.

- “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I have given them glory that You gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and You in Me—so that they may be brought to **complete unity**.”
- What is most instructive for us is that the Greek word for world is *kosmos*, meaning “a collection of opinions, limitations on how we think about things, our narcissistic perspectives and our general unconsciousness.”
- What John is wanting us to see is that there is a world of higher consciousness—a higher awareness that God seeks to bring about in us....
- So, let’s conduct a basic experiment having to do with all us as distinct individuals yet actually being one.
- Is there anyone here who does not know what sorrow is? Hurt? Joy? Suffering? Disappointment? Happiness? Love? Anyone here never laughed?
- We are one.
- Jesus wept. Jesus got angry. Jesus suffered. Jesus was disappointed. Jesus experienced joy. Jesus loved.
- We are one.
- Mark Bekoff, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, writes about animal emotions. He describes sea-lion mothers wailing as they watch their offspring being eaten by killer whales and dolphins struggling to save the lives of dying infants, then mourning afterwards. Elephants display grief, showing visible distress over the dead bodies of companions. Jane Goodall tells a story of a young chimpanzee, Flint, who stopped eating, became socially withdrawn, and eventually died following the death of his mother.
- Long-term animal companions often become fond of one another, playing together, grooming one another, and curling up to sleep, bodies entwined.
- There are hundreds of vidoes on **youtube** showing friendships between Great Danes and kittens, cats and pigs, dogs and ducklings.

- We are one.
- As we become more conscious, we are aware that destroying a rainforest through submission and domination causes immense damage to all of us—to the one. Habitats for living beings are decimated, we risk our quality of life, we threaten the existence of other species, we gamble with our climate and undermine biological diversity.
- What needs to be subdued, frankly, is the most dangerous animal on the planet—you and me—the human animal. As yet another disgruntled employee walks into his job site and murders twelve of his fellow workers....
- Raimon Panikkar, a brilliant theologian, calls for interdependence. His expression of the one is that there are no such things or beings as god, humans, animals, world as completely independent entities. Our dependence on one another is structural—built into the fabric of existence. We are one, emerging in our individual expressions through Christ, by which all things came into being.
- If we live out of this second “in the beginning” story then we will strive to become more compassionate—to create a larger “compassion footprint” in our interactions with animals and the earth.
- The antidote for treating the world as a narcissistic extension of our own self-centeredness is empathy.
- Thinking and feeling our way into the existence of every other living thing.
- I contemplate death and pray for the dead baby robin who has fallen out of the nest. I thank plants as I cut them. I stopped eating pork because I cannot bear how pigs are penned up and inhumanely slaughtered.
- Animals and the earth are asking us to treat them better or leave them alone. The earth is crying out to be loved, not damaged.
- If we live out of the second “In the beginning” story we then are able to re-interpret this first “In the beginning” story.
- “Be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth with your life so that you can have power to fight against everything in it that leads to death. Rule with care and fairness over the

natural world, over the myriads of my beautiful creatures—from tropical fish to soaring eagles to dogs and cats—every creature that is part of this living world.”

- And then, perhaps, one day in the distant future we experience oneness and connection and harmony with all of creation.
- SONG: **YOU’VE GOT A FRIEND** BY JAMES TAYLOR