

“Caretakers not Owners”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
September 24, 2017

Genesis 1:26-28

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “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.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-15a

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

¹⁰ When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, ¹¹ houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, ¹² take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ¹³ The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. ¹⁴ Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, ¹⁵ because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God.

When I was a teenager, I did babysitting to earn money. One of my favorite families to watch lived a few miles away. When someone drove me – or when I was old enough to drive myself – I’d see this lovely parkland surrounded by a stone wall with a large house off to the right. We’d drive a little further to the left and come to this truly small home where Ricky and little sister lived with their parents. It was a beautiful setting.

Eventually I learned that besides his day job installing carpet, Rick, the father, also served as the property’s caretaker. The family lived in what might at one time have been called the steward’s cottage.

Today we talk about stewardship. I hope you noticed that neither scripture reading mentioned money. That will come another week, but today I want us to think about a broader stewardship.

Perhaps we can glean some understanding by looking closer at our texts. I included the Genesis reading to remind us of the ancient theological understanding that God made us – in God’s

image – intending us to “have dominion” over all other creatures. Whole books have been written around these verses as people debated what is meant by “in God’s image” and “dominion” probably since the editors put the book of Genesis together in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. I’m not focusing on any of that. I simply remind us that we have God’s image imprinted within us. This is such an honor, an honor that comes with responsibilities. Which brings us to our second reading.

“Hear, O people. The LORD is our God, and only the LORD.” This *hear* means to listen but also to obey. And before listeners can say, “Well, of course, God is God!” the writer goes on, “And you shall love the LORD with your mind, your self, your strength and your stuff. No, those aren’t the words we usually hear, but scholars suggest that these ones reflect more accurately what the Hebrew writers intended. And they do put things in a different light. Either way though, whether we read the words here in Deuteronomy or in Mark’s gospel when we hear Jesus refer to this law as the most important, it’s clear that complete devotion is expected of us.

The text is about obedience to God and to God’s ways. “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength. These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds. Recite them to your children. Talk about them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up. When we understand that this is about obedience, then it makes sense that this love-language, if you will, was used throughout the Ancient Middle East in political treaties and covenants about the proper attitudes and behavior of vassals toward their rulers. To love your king in this ancient setting was to be loyal to him – to obey him, to fight with him against his enemies, and to faithfully pay taxes.

To love God means to obey God’s rules in the same way that a vassal obeys the terms of a political covenant. And yet... God’s love for us is a passionate, irrational caring that goes beyond everything we can understand. This being the case, it seems that the love God draw from us ought to be both an obeying love and an emotional heart-love.

When we read the psalmist’s words we get a sense of this, “I wait, my whole being waits on the LORD” (130:3) Longing isn’t about obedience. It’s about passionate caring.

Good. God loves us unconditionally, loves us in ways that don’t even make sense. We can trust that this love does not fade. God loves us and want us to love in return. The old, old understanding was that we are to love God with our hearts *and* through what we do and don’t do.

I realize that obedience has fallen out of favor. Adults lament that their youth don’t obey them anymore. People wonder why they are expected to obey God. That’s such an outgrown idea.

I would suggest two reasons for us to obey God. First, it makes sense. Don’t steal. Don’t kill. Don’t wish you had your neighbor’s stuff because it’ll make you crazy and ruin relationships. Pay your taxes; you like having good roads and firefighters and these take money. Farmers used to know that letting a field go fallow for a season was good for the land, and good for the farmer in the long run. Practicing sabbath for ourselves is equally healthy. It can seem nigh impossible these days, but it can be done – taking space in our days or our weeks to step back and simply be – if not for a full day, then for an afternoon, or an hour here and there.

This is God’s law. It makes sense because it’s good for us, good for our neighbors. When you have a windfall, allow others to share in your good fortune. That’s featured in Ruth’s story,

leaving the edges of your field for the gleaners. Don't begrudge others for their stuff, whether they earned it or it's a gift. Isn't that part of Jesus' parable about the workers in the field?

God gives us the law because it's good for us. When we think about the many troubles around us – gun violence, corporate misbehavior, bullying, we can trace it back, at least in part, to a lack of boundaries.

Jesus summed up God's law using the Shema – to love God with our whole being – and another piece found in Leviticus about loving everyone else as we love ourselves. Jesus was responding to a pop quiz. Elsewhere he said that he wasn't removing one jot of the law. It's all still there, all spelled out what loving God and loving neighbors looks like on the ground.

When we practice living with God's law – not because of fear of punishment or because we're told to – we can find that life is richer. We're content. We practice doing more than coexist with people who annoy us. There's enough to go around.

I said there were two reasons to obey God's law. The second reason is out of love. What spouse has tried hard to make things work that are beyond their skill, merely out of love for their partner? What child does what they loathe, for no reason other than their love for their parent? We obey God's law because it's part of our love response to God's love for us.

Okay, we're almost done. You've no doubt been wondering, what this has to do with stewardship? In a word, everything.

Stewardship is about using what we have and what we are, what we've been given and what we've learned, all of it, for God's good purpose. To use church-speak – God is all about building God's kin-dom right here on earth. God calls and invites us to join in making our planet home the best that it can be – loving our neighbors by making sure we all have enough food, health care, roofs over their heads, good work, purpose... And although the ancient writers record only hints of the idea, this also includes care for the earth and its nonhuman inhabitants. Those of us who have ever loved a pet or having a garden realize that paradise isn't paradise when it leaves out part of God's beloved creation.

Where are you doing well at sharing of resources? Where are being let to stretch yourself and your understanding of what it means to practice good stewardship? Have you been feeling a pull to use some of your time differently? Is there a cause that is moving your heart to open your wallet? Do you really need to buy more stuff, or is it possible that you'll find the peace you're craving by clearing out some of the excess?

This is stewardship. These are the kinds of questions we each need to ask ourselves, and answer, so that we can live our best lives; honor God's call for our lives; and and love God.

Amen.