

Genesis 1:1-2, 26-2:3
Matthew 28: 16 - 20

word count: 1,721

Today we have new energy in our church present in the youngest group of people joining the church and committing to walking in the way of Jesus in a long time. And the events of this week in particular demonstrate how we can walk that walk together, and so today, I issue this as a charge to you.

First, let's talk about a bedrock issue, that of our scriptural tradition.

One of the things we have talked about in the past fourteen months in our Confirmation class is how to find where truth exists even when it is not necessarily supported in statistic or fact. In a culture that is based on fact-finding and fact-checking, the poetry of truth becomes almost illusive, and requires a mind trained to see nuance and metaphor in order to grasp it.

Many people today look at the story from Genesis and try to make it fit the facts. The earth was made in six days some six-thousand or so years ago. But it wasn't. Noah was able to take the dinosaurs on the ark, how? By choosing baby ones, of course. Noah just kept them away from the poodles. This kind of magical thinking misses the point entirely.

Trying to force a literal truth onto the story denies it of what it begins to say about the relationship people saw between Creator and humankind. For as long as we know, people have been asking how the earth came to be. There was once a well-known creation story before ours, called the Enuma Elish, from Mesopotamia (now Iraq.) It is as if our own Genesis 1 is commenting on it.

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Let's take just one word, "the deep," from "the void and darkness that covered the face of the deep." The Hebrew word for "deep" is "tehom." Tehom is the word for "Tiamat," the dragon-like creature of the depths of the sea who, in the earlier creation story Enuma Elish, represents chaos and must be tamed. Order must be forced by overcoming chaos.

What the story from Genesis suggests is that there is a life-giving power in the wind, or spirit of God that pre-exists our word and is present with us. It is a story of free will and cooperation, rather than chaos and destruction. Our creation story is in the form of a hymn, with a refrain, "God saw that ... it was good."

The story shows God as creator of the order and balance, and humankind's importance and key role in the scheme of creation. God's creation is also peaceful, unlike the warring factions of Enuma Elish. The focus is on the emergence of a people; the earth serves as an environment for the human community. Genesis 1 works within the science of its time to tell of divine power and purpose, and the unique place of humans.

There are two creation stories placed in Genesis side by side, and they are slightly conflicting. It is as if the editor was saying, "Here is one way we heard the story, and here is another." Genesis One is a poetic story that places humans at the pinnacle of creation.

Today I want to lift some points up from this creation story as a charge to our Confirmation class and new members for living out honest, compassionate and faithful convictions for a new tomorrow.

First, we read that humanity, both male and female, appears at one stroke. We are co-creators of new life and primary care-takers for the whole earth. Therefore, shouldn't we also read that gender equality is explicit in this telling of the summit of creation? Neither female subordination nor any form of sexism can be grounded in this text. So my first charge to you is this: the full equality of men and women is not only about fairness, it is about spiritual wholeness for humankind. I look at the level of violence and war that surrounds our world and it reveals to me a result of the imbalance of power on many levels, among them being an imbalance between the masculine and the feminine.

Second, the instruction for humanity “to exercise dominion” over all other forms of life does not authorize environmental destruction or depletion. It is, rather, a charge for humans to care for our world, so that a productive and renewable earth may sustain the life of all creatures. In another century, a “flat earth society” may have seemed a quaint and humorous notion, but today, the denial of science may prove fatal for humankind. You will have to find ways of living upon this earth more gently than we have in the past. The theology of “dominion” must come to mean “caretaking” of the earth. It is your charge to take on the responsibility for a sustainable environment where others have failed. Your children will depend on you for this.

Third, class divisions cannot be justified by this text. Our tradition tells us of a God that decrees that the goods of the earth are for all humans to share and enjoy. No allowance is made for some humans to acquire goods at the expense of others. It is presumed that there is livelihood enough on earth for all. We live in a time and within a pocket of geography that is both blessed and cursed by “Affluenza.” The gates that roll across our communities may keep others out, but ultimately it may be our own hearts and consciences that are imprisoned when we are closed off from being close witnesses to poverty and deprivation. Our hearts may not be properly conditioned in the development of compassion, or exercised for the strength to do justice. Keep your eyes and your hearts open.

Fourth, nor can racial divisions be based on this text. If every human being bears the image of God, each thus stands in a special and protected relationship with God. If ever there was a green Eden, we know now where it was—where our common roots lie—in the beautiful mother of Africa. If gender and class cannot be employed to privilege some and marginalize others, then racial oppression and discrimination have no place in the realm of God for the human family. Your charge is to have the courage to speak up when someone makes the racist remark based on their assumption that it is safe to do so with another person who shares the color of their skin. Your profession of faith makes you an advocate for justice for the whole human family.

And fifth, you are the generation that will see loving relationships for what they are without prejudice. Which is simply; loving relationships. The creation of humankind in Genesis is not translated well. The name Adam comes from the Hebrew ‘adamah, which means, “ground.” We are from the very earth upon which we live, and this is what the name “Adam” means. We were created and have evolved (the “E” word) from the same source, different as we are and exactly as we are, yet we consider love our highest aim.

Sixty years ago, the California Supreme Court struck down a law preventing people of different races from marrying. Last week, the same court declared the ban on same-sex marriage unconstitutional. In 1948, God and scripture were invoked as reason to deny interracial couples the right to marry.

Today, the argument, “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” is no more than the trite rhyme of sing-song simpletons, whose recourse to this recitation exposes the

hollowness of their argument while trivializing the rights of a minority. Stand up for the friends you are beginning to discover around you when they are beaten up for being who they are. They will love you for it, and so will any reasonable and compassionate person.

This brings me to my last point about our scriptures today. The bibles (or books) you have been given today were never meant to be used as weapons. My favorite quote by my former pastor, William Sloane Coffin is one I have used often, and it is this: “Too many people use the bible like a drunk uses a lamppost—for support rather than illumination.” Let these bibles be a source of support, wisdom, faith-building and illumination. They are not protected by the second amendment.

In Matthew, Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,” and again, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” What does it mean to you to be a disciple today?

The development of an open and giving faith results in finding an open and giving life. You have worked at food pantries and at the AIDS Walk and Crop Walk. You have visited other houses of faith and seen that we are different and yet alike. A deepening sense of compassion calls us to act from that compassion.

The most devastating earthquake in a generation hits China. The cyclone and floods in Burma have killed or displaced countless people. Hurricane Katrina ravaged a densely populated area of our own country (and the response was about as fast). You are a part of a tradition where being a disciple means reaching out it times exactly like these.

Welcome to the discipleship of this church.

If you come to be disciples in a faith tradition that makes you judgmental and narrow, then what does that say about how you come to know a God we define by the word “love”?

If the church in which you practice your faith makes you more open and more loving, then what are the fruits of finding your home here, and within the United Church of Christ?

I hope that your faith is an unenclosed one. Unlike Mary McCarthy’s famous quote, “Religion makes good people a little better and bad people a little worse,” let faith make you open and more loving, more accepting of others, willing to accept that your God is bigger than you ever imagined, and grateful to know that life is precious and you are a part of God at work.

Amen.

Sermon Resource:

In the “Charges One to Five,” I used as a base template the Lectionary aids for “A Sacred Conversation on Race,” by Norman Gottwald and Laura Lagerquist-Gottwald, on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

Scripture for Sunday, May 18, 2008

Genesis 1:1-2, 26-2:3

1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

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." 29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

Matthew 28: 16 - 20 (RCL)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

A Prayer of Approach

**O God of unconditional love,
you who show no partiality in respect to persons, nations, or races,
we have heard your good news of great joy for all the people,
We hear that good news, and in hearing, believe.
We know that your sanctuary is a house of worship for all people,
with no regard for the color of our skin, our gender, our class, our sexual orientation.
As we worship you, knit us into a people,
a seamless garment of many colors.
May we celebrate our unity, made whole in our diversity. Amen.**