

Sermon: June 28, 2020 – Psalm 145: 8-14
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

View at <https://youtu.be/KFU8VwdxjY4>

This coming Wednesday, Canada marks another birthday – 153, this time – and that, for me, is always a time for reflection. I love many aspects of our national identity – the diversity of landscapes, the prevalence of wildlife, the can-do attitude coupled with a politeness that other nations tease us about. I also acknowledge the challenges we face: our ongoing need for reconciliation with the peoples who were here long before my ancestors showed up; the warning signs we are receiving from melting permafrost in the north, and receding glaciers in our own back yard; the extra scrutiny placed on people of colour; the economic and environmental conundrum we face regarding petroleum. So as we approach another Canada Day, I want to spend some time taking stock once more, but that's easier said than done, because so much of my attention is already taken up with ongoing concerns about COVID and what I and we should be doing now and doing next.

As I seek some emotional spaciousness to do this work, I'm drawn to the book of Psalms, because the Psalms are the ancient work-bench where our ancestors in the faith have worked out their thoughts and feelings in challenging times, in the presence and with the participation of a loving and patient God. The Psalms express joy, jubilation, pride, hope, and confidence in God. They also express anger, resentment, confusion, embarrassment, and lament. And where I landed, among the many potential landing places, was Psalm 145.

Psalm 145 speaks of the big context of our lives, the invisible ground of being upon which life rests. And the big context portrayed by Psalm 145, is that of God's *Dominion* – a word where our religious understandings intersect with our wonderings about where we are as a nation at this point in time.

Dominion is a well-loved word from my childhood. Admittedly, this was in part due to the fact that my big brother, Herb's first long-term job in High School was at the *Dominion grocery store* in east-central Regina, and anything my big brother did got top marks from me... but also because I thought it was so cool and unique that while other countries were republics or kingdoms or just plain nations, Canada was a *Dominion*, and to my young mind *Dominion* was a big, classy word.

Our copy of the *Canadian Encyclopedia* presently has the very important job of holding up the router in our spare bedroom/office/TV room/recording studio but I pressed it into service to find out what a *Dominion* is, and it tells me (v.1 p.612) that in 1867 there was some debate as to what to call this newly-formed entity. Sir Leonard Tilley, suggested "Dominion", quoting Psalm 72:8, "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. The Fathers of Confederation agreed that this would "give dignity to the federation" while also acknowledging the British crown. Interestingly enough, even after the patriation of our constitution in 1982, and the renaming of Dominion Day to Canada Day, this nation is still officially "the Dominion of Canada."

A *Dominion* implies independence/autonomy yet still acknowledges an authority beyond that – in Canada's case, the Queen - and in the Bible, God. Psalm 145, among more than thirty places where the concept of "dominion" is articulated in the Hebrew

Scriptures, reveals an understanding of life that respects that we as humans live our own lives and make our own choices, yet from everlasting to everlasting, everything around us is held within the power and lovingkindness of God. On a day to day basis, humans hold huge responsibility and accountability for what happens to this planet, but the big picture, is of one great big amazing sphere, within the constant care of the Divine. The Indigenous understanding of everything in the world being “all my relations”, interconnected by one common Creator, says basically the same thing, and so does Richard Rohr’s concept of the “Universal Christ”. Every element of this biosphere pulsates with the loving energy of God.

In Psalm 145, it’s clear that the Psalmist is wrestling with a question, or is attempting to address a question that others are asking, namely, “who is this God, anyway? What is the nature of God”? The answer comes at the beginning and end of this passage:

8 The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger [other translations: “patient”] and abounding in steadfast love. 9 The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

13 The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. 14 The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.

If we can get past the masculine pronouns, check out the descriptors: gracious is used twice, and also merciful, patient, abounding in steadfast love, good, compassionate, faithful, and specifically oriented to those who are falling and those who have been bowed down, either by life circumstances or by the oppression of those in power. That’s the kind of God we’re talking about. Not power-hungry or domineering or controlled by rage, but gracious, compassionate, focused on those who need extra positive attention because of all the additional challenges life hands them. A God whose emphasis on need changes moves things from a rule-bound approach to life, to one that is shaped by compassion. Regardless of how we choose to organize ourselves in communities and nations, that is the Dominion we live in: one ruled by the heart of God, that is willing to give extra attention to the plant or animal on the verge of extinction; willing to hold us in particular tenderness when our body, mind or spirit is injured; committed to the kind of justice called for by Black Lives Matter, giving extra and primary attention to those who have been systemically bowed down and made to live in fear.

In its most positive sense, that’s what a Dominion can be – for us as Canadians, for us as Christians, for us as earth-dwellers. There is, however, a potentially negative side to this word, “dominion” and it shows up way back at the story of creation (Genesis 1:26 and 28), where the first humans are given “dominion” over all living things. Theology Professor Ellen F. Davis writes that the problem is that “‘dominion’ is so readily confused with ‘domination.’ Since the Renaissance, Genesis 1:26 has frequently been invoked in the West to support the project of ‘conquering’, ‘commanding, or ‘enslaving’ nature.” The same principles, heartbreakingly, were applied to encounters with first peoples on colonized lands. But the Biblical concept of dominion cannot be equated to domination, and Ellen Davis goes on to say why: “the Hebrew phrase (radah b-) includes a preposition that is in most cases not equivalent to the English preposition ‘over.’ A more satisfactory translation of that crucial verse might be “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, so they may exercise skilled mastery among – or with respect to – the fish of the sea and among the birds of the air.”

In the same way that a skilled boss or supervisor never makes you feel subservient or diminished, we are called to create a culture of care rather than a culture of subjugation. We humans are called not to dominate or be domineering, but to a life of stewardship: acting with the best interests of all creation in mind.

This is so completely consistent, with what we learned earlier about the qualities of God. If, as suggested by the Biblical creation story, human beings have been given the responsibility to look after all living beings and the planet we live on, we are also called to reflect the character traits of the one who gives us that responsibility. You know, the God whom Psalm 145 describes as gracious, merciful, patient, abounding in steadfast love, good, compassionate, faithful, and specifically oriented to those who are falling and those who have been bowed down. That is who we are to be in relation to this planet, that is who we are to be in relation to our neighbour. The way that we accept the responsibility to take care of things, will shape the kind of Church and town and province and nation we live in, and it will absolutely reveal what we believe about God. For the only way that we can approach this world with carelessness and cruelty, is to either ignore that big picture of a loving God who is in all things and with all things and between all things... or to somehow believe that God is basically angry and selfish and we should be too.

This very old-fashioned, almost archaic word, “dominion” gives us such an important lens to look through, in all aspects of who we are and where we are at the moment. Once we can move about more freely, are we going to be burning as much fossil fuel as we used to, driving and flying hither and yon just because we can? Once we can gather once more in this room (RCMUC sanctuary), will we commit ourselves to ways that this “home base” can have a smaller “carbon footprint”?... and are there ways that the *entirety* of the facility can be accessed by all people, not just those free of mobility challenges? And even now, in the in-between time when things have not yet fully “opened up” in the old familiar ways, how can we begin to turn our attention from the inward focus required for safety, to the outward focus that is very much at the heart of this congregation and, I think and hope, a large part of who we want to be as Canadians? These have been days of unusual challenge and as always, with challenge comes opportunity: the opportunity to be reminded once more of how amazing God is, how the loving kindness of God infuses all of life, how we can participate in the place and process of Dominion by letting ourselves also be shaped by that grace and patience and compassionate attention to need.

We reflect this day on who we are, and whose we are. Thanks be to God!

References cited:

Davis, Ellen F. “Meaning of Dominion.” <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/meaning-of-dominion>

Forsey, Eugene A. “Dominion” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1988. I:612.

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