

## *Dominion and Servanthood and Oceans*

Genesis 1:9-10, 20-23; Daniel 9:7

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I changed my sermon topic when I saw the pictures of the brown pelicans looking as if they had been dipped in chocolate, unable to get lift from their heavy wings, some of them floating absolutely helpless in the same dark fluid that powers our lives. Somehow those photos prompted a response that maps of the spread of the oil could not. Those birds became the symbol of all of those whose lives and livelihoods and culture are at risk.

I thought of the prayer of Daniel, a prayer after the greatest disaster in his lifetime, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The slow-motion catastrophe in the Gulf is as terrible as seeing the temple burned; it is every bit as much a disaster as 9-11 or Katrina and will have longer lasting consequences than either. Daniel, in the face of disaster, offered a prayer of confession: “Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame” (9:7). As those pelicans are covered with oil, we are covered with shame.

But pastor, do *we* really bear any of the shame? Shouldn't it be BP that is ashamed, and the government that did not regulate them and has not reacted quickly enough? There is plenty to be ashamed of, just as there is plenty of oil. But we cannot sit here clean and innocent. It was our appetites that drove the drilling. All but one or two of us have chosen to drive cars and to use electricity generated by oil and to buy plastic doodads made from oil. As a people, somewhere along the way we could have designed—or at least demanded—an economy and a way of life that functioned in harmony with God's creation rather than in opposition to it, but we did not. OK, perhaps it was our grandfathers and their grandfathers before them who made many of the choices that led us to this point in our history, and no doubt the choices made sense to them given what they knew at the time. But we are the generation that *knew* the consequences and the risks and continued to demand more and more.

What do Christians have to say about this catastrophe? We have to say first of all that it is a massive failure of stewardship. God entrusted the oceans to our care and we have filled them with our sewage, chemicals, and oil. The creation story we read from the first chapter in the Bible makes it clear that God created the seas and then filled them with living creatures. And God saw that it was good. The oceans cover 70% of the earth's surface. The oceans are home to 90% of all life on earth. Scientists estimate that there are more than a million species living in the seas, and most of them have not been identified.

Still, when we talk about protecting the earth we are usually thinking of the 30% of the earth that is dry. When we think of protecting animals, we think of the 10% that live on the land. But the oceans are the Lord's, too, and all that dwell therein. For at least the last couple of centuries we have lived as if the oceans belonged to us—as dumping grounds, as if God intended it for our transportation, and as if it was so large that it could never be exhausted as a source of fish.

One of our very conservative members was telling me yesterday about a conversation with a commercial fisherman. It was in the context of a rant against government regulation and how it was hurting the fishermen—which is no doubt true. But my friend said to the fisherman, “It's ridiculous. The ocean is so big. No one could possibly catch all the fish.” And the fisherman replied, “No, you're wrong. With the technology they've got today they *could* take all the fish

out of the sea.” Here in New England we’ve heard tales about what the cod harvest used to be like, but it’s nothing like that now. In fact, if you compare the populations of large predatory fish—like tuna, swordfish, cod, and flounder—to what the levels were in the preindustrial days of the sailing ships, the oceans only have 10% as many of those fish as they once did.

In Genesis 1, God created humans on the last day of creation. God gave us *dominion* over all the other creatures, including the fish of the sea. Unfortunately modern humans—since the 17<sup>th</sup> century at least—have understood dominion to mean domination. We have viewed our God-given status as the right to use other creatures any way we want to. But is that what God meant when he gave us dominion? Well, the second story about the creation of humans in Genesis 2 makes it clear that the function of the man and woman was to *take care* of the garden. The Old Testament as a whole makes it clear that land belongs to God, not to humans. We are tenants, sharecroppers, stewards. We are responsible to the owner for how we take care of it. Therefore there were even laws requiring that animals and the earth itself be given a Sabbath; even farmland had to be allowed to rest every seventh year.

But what did *Jesus* say about dominion? Jesus said that the Gentiles like to dominate, to lord their authority over others, but it is not to be so with you. Whoever wants to be great among you must be the servant. He acted that out on the night that he shared this supper. Jesus took off his robe and took up the towel of a slave and washed the feet of his students in order to teach them what it meant to be a servant. What does it mean to love your neighbor, according to Jesus? It means to wash the wounds of the hurting, to care for them even if they are strangers to you. For God to say that he gives us dominion over the fish in the sea is not to say that we can kill them all or eat them all, but that we have been given responsibility to use the oceans wisely as servants of the created world, cooperating with the other creatures so that there will be resources for our children and our children’s children. This is our Father’s world, not our world to do with as we will. This is our Father’s world which he intended to be a blessing to all generations. We have no right to make our generation the last to enjoy its bounty.

David Gushee, one of the best Baptist ethicists around (who was also one of “my” Baptist students in New York many years ago), wrote as part of the “On Faith” panel for *The Washington Post*:

“The Bible also teaches that human beings are sinners. This is a very rich doctrine that means not just or even mainly that we do wrong intentionally, but that our pride, greed, ignorance, and general fallibility leave us blundering into disaster without any intent to do wrong...The fact that we have now discovered—that humans were smart enough to figure out how to drill such a hole underwater but not smart enough to figure out how to plug it—makes for a great and terrible case study in human sinfulness.”

[http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/david\\_gushee/2010/06/christianity\\_human\\_nature\\_and\\_the\\_gulf\\_spill\\_crisis.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/david_gushee/2010/06/christianity_human_nature_and_the_gulf_spill_crisis.html)

You see, it’s the old story of Adam and Eve. We are not willing to acknowledge human limits—the limits to our ability to know, the limits to what we need to have. We want to have it all. We think we can ignore the risks. We are unable to restrain ourselves when our appetites drive us. A half-century ago the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was asked if he believed that the story of Adam and Eve was literally true. He shook his head: “No, it’s truer than that.”

[\[http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/susan\\_brooks\\_thistlethwaite/2010/06/profaning\\_creation.html\]](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/susan_brooks_thistlethwaite/2010/06/profaning_creation.html). It’s true of us. G. K. Chesterton was asked what was most wrong with the world and he answered, “*I am.*” [quoted by Jim Wallis, [blog.soj.net/2010/06/03](http://blog.soj.net/2010/06/03)]. If we ask ourselves what is wrong with our world, with the Gulf, with the economy—at least if we ask ourselves that in church—we are bound to answer at least in part “*I am.*” I am what’s wrong. I am covered with shame. I am the one who is going to have to be rewired to use energy in a different way. I am the one who is going to have to stop demanding what we cannot have

without terrible risks. I am going to have to be content with what I have, or less, and not demand more and more.

Am I making too big a deal of this? I was stunned this week to read a column by a Southern Baptist fundamentalist I used to despise. Russell Moore was this brat of an intellectual who was sent by the thought police to spy on meetings of moderate Baptists, trying to sniff out a radical feminist or homosexual and write exposés. The fundamentalist child president of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville hired Russell Moore as the child dean of the theology school. But Russell is from Biloxi, Mississippi. He went home. And he wrote that leaving this week was worse than leaving after Katrina had almost wiped his town off the map. Listen: “As I pass that sign on Highway 90 telling me I’m leaving Biloxi, I can look out behind the water’s horizon and know there’s a Pale Horse there. A massive rupture in the ocean’s floor is gushing oil into the Gulf of Mexico, with plumes of petroleum great enough to threaten to destroy the sea-life there for my lifetime, if not forever. Everything is endangered, from the seafood and tourism industries to the crabs and seagulls on the beach to the churches where I first heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is more than a threat to my hometown, and to our neighboring communities. It is a threat to national security greater than most Americans can even contemplate, because so few of them know how dependent they are on the eco-systems of the Gulf of Mexico.” <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20100601/ecological-catastrophe-and-the-uneasy-evangelical-conscience/index.html>

Russell said that this catastrophe should be our Pearl Harbor. Before that day, conservatives thought that America could just ignore what was going on in Europe and the Pacific. Some of the most influential people in Congress and the media argued that this was none of our concern. But after Pearl Harbor it became clear very quickly that this is everyone’s concern.

He confessed his sins as an evangelical Christian. Because he believed in free markets he thought we should trust corporations to protect natural resources. That, he said, is akin to a youth minister letting a teenage girl and boy share a sleeping bag on a retreat because he “believes in young people.” The reality of sin means that we have to limit every claim to sovereignty and autonomy. We have to use government to restrain those who would harm others. It was a sin to treat the environment as someone else’s issue, as if it were somehow a concern of liberals and neo-pagans. And it was a failure of evangelicals that they were so individualistic that they had an inadequate view of human culture. Conservatives of all people ought to be about preserving culture, and a whole culture with its traditions and mores is likely to be destroyed in the Gulf. When any natural environment is used up, cultures die. Climb the Mayan temples and you’ll get the point.

Russell asks the question: “Will people believe us when we speak about the One who brings life and that abundantly, when they see that we don’t care about that which kills and destroys?”

And so we come back to that brown pelican, covered with oil. We enjoy watching pelicans by the dozens on a sandbar just off the beach at Hilton Head every year. I’ll never forget those images of hundreds of pelicans flying across the wetlands in the movie *The Pelican Brief*—more memorable than Julia Roberts. Now I’ll never forget these pelicans covered with shame.

You may not know that the pelican has long been a Christian symbol. In medieval times it was believed that the mother pelican was so intent on feeding her children that she would pierce her own breast with her beak in order to feed her children with her own blood. Pelicans do hold their beak down to their chest and one variety actually has a red patch on its chest, so that

may be the origin of the story. But the pelican became a powerful symbol for Jesus, and then for the Eucharist—for this supper we are about to share. Two colleges at Oxford have the pelican on their crests. And the state of Louisiana has the pelican on its state shield and on its state flag, complete with little baby pelicans and drops of blood falling down to their mouths. So perhaps today it is not so strange to think of that brown pelican as Jesus, the one who was pierced for our sake, the one who gave us his own blood, but to see him covered with our shame, for our sake.

We are people who have been washed of the shame which Jesus bore, who have already been forgiven for our radical selfishness. Jesus calls us stand with him as servants to the world he loves so much.