

## **Ecological Compassion**

A sermon by Courtney Joyner

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Devereux United Methodist Church, Devereux, Ga.

*(Author's note: I presented this sermon at Devereux United Methodist Church in Devereux, Georgia on Earth Day, April 22, 2007. If used in other contexts, it may be appropriate to compose an introduction that would tie it to the theme of the day.)*

Scripture: Genesis 1:27-31

So much of our thinking about how to be in relationship with the Earth comes from our fundamental beliefs about our place in the world. Sometimes our own religion has etched into our minds the notion that the earth is ours to do with whatever we wish. It's an easy belief to fall into, because we'd like to think that we are at the top of the chain. All that exists is for us—to feed us, to work for us, to make us money, and to make us happy. Isn't that what God said to humankind on that sixth day of creation? Well...not exactly.

God's words to humankind were to have dominion over the earth and its creatures.

Dominion is a word that seems to cause more trouble than it solves. Dominion sounds so much like domination. When we think of domination, we think of autocratic rule of one thing over something else. But dominion has a different connotation. Dominion is the benevolent sovereignty of one thing over another. The similarity in these words is that both domination and dominion describe a type of power. Their distinguishing factor lies in the motive behind the power. The motive in domination is so the ruler can get whatever he/she wants. However, the motive in dominion is for the ruler to be entrusted with the best interest of the subject.

I want to paint a couple pictures that will show the drastic contrast between domination and dominion as it pertains to care of the earth. These are not actual accounts, but we can imagine scenes like this happening all around the United States.

Anna makes her living off the land. She is a developer wanting to make a profit on some land near a growing town. She buys 30 acres of densely forested area. This will be a perfect place for a subdivision that will hold 75 new homes. The contractors she hires come in with their big equipment and begin their work by cutting down trees. When they finish the land is bare and unrecognizable. The animals who lived in this forest have to move to the surrounding forest where the species becomes overcrowded, and they begin to die of hunger. Next the builders begin erecting the homes. They use beautiful materials that they had to ship halfway around world. They don't know that, where they mined granite in Asia, the land is now devoid of necessary minerals. Then landscapers arrive to put in flowers and grass that are foreign to the local area. To keep the lawns green requires thousands of gallons of water that in a few years will lower the water table in the surrounding farmland. The developer Anna makes an enormous profit, but it's at the expense of the land and animals locally and the world around.

The second picture is of Jake, a farmer in a small community who also makes his living off the land, but in very different way than Anna. Jake grows several crops on his 300 acres. He knows he could be making more money than does, but he chooses instead to live in harmony with the land. The animals are happy that Jake leaves several dozen acres forested to give them habitat and shade. The crops grow from the clean, natural nutrients of the soil, without being sprayed down with pounds of fertilizers and pesticides. Jake rotates the crops regularly so the soil stays rich in vitamins and minerals. The air smells fresh and clean without fumes from gasoline engines. Jake's employees remain loyal throughout year to plow, plant, and harvest all naturally with only the help of animals and manual tools. Jake could make a lot more money, but he knows the cost on the environment would not be worth it.

It's domination versus dominion. When we view God's decree for dominion as dominating the earth and its creatures, then we think God has given us license to do whatever we want. We believe that whatever we do with the land is God's will, no matter what the cost is to the earth and the plants and the animals and the

people. It's disturbing what this logic really says when we follow it to the extreme. Pollution—God's will. Human caused lack of water—God's will. Chemicals that kill wildlife—God's will. Landfills seeping toxins—God's will.

But the beauty is that we don't have to understand it that way. When we view dominion for what it really is, we realize that God invites us to enter into a covenant in which we share dominion with God. God charges us with the great responsibility to care for everything God has created. When we share dominion with God, we make decisions with the best interest of all creation in mind. This means we won't always be doing what we desire, but instead we're doing what the earth desires, what the plants desire, and what the animals desire. In the end, we realize that caring for the earth is what we desire, too. Keeping the planet and its creatures healthy eventually leads to our best health, because we are all connected in a web of relationships. What we do to the earth, we do to ourselves.

Now I want to invite you to join me in a move of compassion I first learned about in a financial stewardship campaign. We can call this a campaign for ecological stewardship. The idea is called "One Step Up." If we picture a staircase with an infinite number of steps, we can find our level of ecological compassion on one of those steps. At the very bottom means no ecological compassion whatsoever. With each step up comes another level of compassion. The goal is for each of us to decide to take "One Step Up." The next step will be different for each of us. There's no need to judge which step we take based on other people, and there's no need to get to the higher steps all at once. With that in mind, whatever it is that God is inviting us to do, let's take "One Step Up" in our ecological compassion. Perhaps we will feel called to make one new step each week or one new step each month because the journey is never over. But the journey is important, and it's worth doing. When we truly care for earth and its creatures, we are good stewards of the dominion God shares with us. Thanks be to God.