

Tomatoes

“Dominate. Subdue.”

Genesis 1:27-31

God’s Thinkers and Tinkers: taking care of God’s stuff #1

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In the Garden

It’s become a routine. Each morning I’ve been rising from my sleep and wandering off to the window overlooking the backyard to look down on the vegetable garden. I wonder, “How has it fared overnight? Are there more tomatoes red with ripeness? Are the cucumbers still climbing the trellis or could they be sending more tentacles to wrap around the peppers? I look down from the heights to that hundred-foot patch. Then, when I’ve prepared myself and my breakfast I step in the garden to examine closely.

*And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own,
and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.*

I grew up in the suburbs: a city boy from the get-go. Outdoors has always been home, but it’s been mostly to get away to the wilds where the terrain lifts to the heights where the eagle soars. Outdoors has always been, for me, where God’s presence is raw and untamed and where the voice speaks without interruption.

Here, among the tomatoes I’ve discovered something within that’s almost parental. There’s a compulsion, almost, to check the distance from the fruit lowest on the vine to the ground, caring that it not be so near as to be victim to bugs, retying the branches to the stakes if it is.

And the caring is, surprisingly, fulfilling. Like it’s calling something within me that has always been there, supposed to have been there.

And yet had not been noticed. Until now.

Farmer.

It used to be a name I would call another driver ahead of me if he were going too slow (until I started to react that way when I had a real farmer in my car).

Now it's a name of honor (though it's likely most farmers would still hesitate to honor me with it).

I met a coed in college who said that her dream was to get a job back in New York City, which was her home, and live on 5th Avenue where she would never have to see another tree. I could never understand that.

Now I can *really* understand old retired Judge Danford standing near his home in Williamsburg, looking over his stand of Christmas trees set on the rolling hills and accented with snow; and it seemed all he could do is take a deep breath of the fresh Northern Michigan air, shake his head with a smile and say, "God is so good."

There's something fulfilling when you do more than just occupy the earth. Whether it's breaking the ground and growing a plant; or figuring out the physics behind gasoline combustion and the ratio behind horsepower and torque so you can harness it to turn wheels that will get you down a road at 75 miles per hour (oops), or learn how to harness the radiation of the sun to recharge a battery; or learn the physiology of the human body in order to work a healing: there's something fulfilling behind working together with God in the operation of this earth.

In the Image

I had a chance to talk for a time with a weather forecaster when we lived up north. He was a member of an environmental club and was talking about leading one of its meetings. I told him I would like to go sometime; and he asked me, "Why?" He really didn't see Christians in a very good light. For him, the ecology of the earth was something to take very seriously. He loved it, cared about it, and was worried about its future.

The way he understood it, Christians had treated the earth very badly. He told me that our Bible set us up to abuse the earth. He cited the verses we read this morning, where it says right in the beginning of the sacred book that God told us to have dominion over the earth and subdue it. And then through history, that's just what we've done. With the license we believe we've been given by none other than God, we have used the earth for our own selfish consumptive ends without regarding the effects.

Dominating and subduing, we have taken its resources – even more than we've wanted much less than we've needed; we've polluted, we've killed off whole species of animals; we've dumped hundreds of thousands of tons of toxic chemicals into atmosphere, oceans, soil and streams to get rid of pests and produce our technologies.

He couldn't see that. As far as he was concerned, the earth was sacred, and he couldn't tolerate the sacrilege of Christians.

The sad thing about his complaint is that he was largely right. That's what Christians and most everyone else has done through the years. If they gave a thought to what justified it, lots of Christians would point to Genesis 1 and say, "But see? God told us to."

Only they and the northern weather forecaster were both wrong about the Bible. Genesis tells us to do no such thing. In fact, if it tells us anything when it says to take dominion and subdue the earth, it tells us to do take responsibility for its care.

When the writers of Genesis told the story of Creation, they pictured God taking great care to set up a paradise that yet needed continued perfecting. Each "day" had been a phase in the unfolding fashioning of the universe and the earth. Then, late in the epoch in which God created cattle and creeping things and wild animals, came the creation of humankind –

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

The Latin term that refers to our special nature here is *Imago Dei*. People often hear that and think that it means that we were made to physically look like God, and that God (being quite old) should look like an old man with a very long white beard.

The point of the word, though has more to do with the way we are made to be like God in every way. Human beings are given the kind of gifts that equip us to take up God-given responsibilities and mirror God to the world.

When this was written, kings were considered representatives of the gods, ruling in their behalf. The writers of Genesis were more democratic: we *all* were designated to be God's representatives. We all were given the gifts and the responsibility to care for and rule the earth the way that God would take charge of it.¹

You be the judge of whether God knew what he was doing, but as the crowning of all creation, God made a creature that would continue fashioning the earth the way God would fashion it – creating order out of the chaos; filling and blessing the earth.

Taking dominion, then, is an awesome responsibility. As God's thinkers, we've got to figure out what's best for the world.

As God's tinkers, we've got to tamper with it so as to make it more complete. Subduing the earth is not a matter of taking a choke hold over it, so that it wiggles at our mercy: it means that we can cultivate it, make it more fit to be abundant as God desires. If the world is placed in our hands in trust, by the One who ultimately owns it, how else should we care for it?

God's thinkers and tinkers: that's what we are. I hope that we don't turn out to be God's stinkers.

In the Earth

Which leads me back to: tomatoes. Noel Paul Stookey sang a song a while back that captures the essence of what it means to be a steward of the earth.

Chorus:

Inch by inch, row by row
Gonna make this garden grow
All it takes is a rake and a hoe
And a piece of fertile ground
Inch by inch, row by row
Someone bless these seeds I sow
Someone warm them from below
Till the rains come tumbling down

Pullin' weeds and pickin' stones,
Man is made of dreams and bones
I feel the need to grow my own
Cause the time is close at hand
Grain for grain, sun and rain
I'll find my way in nature's chain
Tune my body and my brain
To the music from the land

Plant your rows straight and long,
Temper them with prayer and song
Mother earth will make you strong
If you give her love and care
An old crow watching hungrily
From his perch in yonder tree
In my garden I'm as free
As that feathered thief up there

(chorus)²

It's at the core of our very nature to think and tink to care for this earth. It's the way God made us.

2. The kick out of taking care. So maybe that's why the big, red juicy tomato that comes from our garden tastes so good! Maybe that's why I'm getting such a kick out of taking care of the garden from which it came. And maybe that's why you and I both feel the joy welling up when we *care* for the earth...and don't just simply use it.

¹ Terrance E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. I. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1994. p 345.

² David Mallet, *Garden Song*. © 1975,1977, 1978 Cherry Lane Music Company.