

“We’ve Got the Whole World in Our Hands”

Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 7, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might stretch our hearts as wide open as your love. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

There is a lot to make sense of in our world today. One way of framing current events – both the broader context of the coronavirus pandemic and the recent intensity of the Movement for Black Lives – is with the question made famous by Cain in Genesis 4. Do you know the story of Cain and Abel? They were brothers, Eve & Adam’s sons. Cain was a farmer, and Abel was a shepherd. At some point, they both brought offerings before God, and God – for reasons unknown – preferred Abel’s offering. Cain was so jealous and mad he lured his brother out into a field and killed him. God said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And Cain’s response – one in a long line of humans trying to disavow responsibility – was “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain intended for that to be a rhetorical question, of course, but it isn’t. Scripture makes very clear that we can’t let it remain a rhetorical question, both because humanity continues asking it and because the answer is so emphatically Yes. Our scripture lessons for today have some fascinating ways of answering the question. They show us that we are our brother’s keeper, and then they stretch the definition of “brother” far beyond Cain’s reckoning.

Let's start with verses 4 & 5 from Psalm 8, where the writer is talking about humans. Pause for a moment to consider your current feelings about the state of humanity. Which phrase is a better match: "What are mortals that you care for them?" or "You have crowned them with glory and honor"? We probably all vacillate between these two perspectives many times a day, but lately it's been harder for me to see the "glory and honor". There are a lot of folks out there who seem like they need a keeper! Rejecting and defying basic lessons from kindergarten – like 'keep your hands to yourself' and 'cover your mouth when you cough' – have become politicized acts of social violence, one way or another.

But the really hard part comes in the next verse: "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands." Yikes. That word – "dominion" – has so much baggage. Obviously, it's related to the word "dominate", and throughout much of history, that's how humans have chosen to interpret this biblical idea that God gave us dominion over the earth and everything in it. Creation has been treated like a commodity from which humans are encouraged to extract every last drop of profit and advantage. This understanding was even extended to include treating fellow human beings as commodities. This approach reflects a grotesque twisting of Cain's question: having killed a brother or sister, the defiant cry is heard, "I am my brother's keeper; I was free to treat him however I wanted!" The scriptures that talk about having "dominion over" are ripe for misinterpretation. Those who want to justify

abuses of power can point to them and blame God for their own sinfulness. Those who think humanity's dominion over the planet is how we reflect the image of God end up with a God worthy of nothing but fear, even as they exact his supposed terrible wrath on others in the divine name. Rather than being mutual keepers with others, they set themselves up as judges and prison guards for everyone else. The glory and honor get harder and harder to see.

So if we want to discern what it really means for followers of Jesus to share in dominion over the works of God's hands, perhaps we should look at our other scripture lesson today, in which Jesus also talks about "all authority in heaven and on earth". Because he has been given this authority, he is commissioning the disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations." This is where it becomes clear that the definition of "brother" has been expanded. Humanity has dominion over the works of God's hands. Discipleship must be brought to all nations, that is, to all people. Our responsibility, as the Disciples' mission imperative reminds us, stretches from "our doorsteps to the ends of the earth." Starving populations in Yemen, grieving mothers in Minneapolis, the elderly person who ends up at our grocery store hoping everyone is wearing a mask because they don't have someone to shop for them – we are called to be "keepers", to share responsibility for all of them, just as they are also our keepers. We sing that the whole world is in God's hands, but the whole world is also in our hands, because that's where God is keeping it for now.

Jesus sent the disciples out to “all nations”. And what did their mission look like? “Baptizing them” and “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” This does sound a bit authoritarian at first glance. **Make** them disciples. **Obey. Commanded.** These are strong words. But let’s unpack them a little more. If you had to sum up Jesus’ teachings or commandments in one word, what would it be? I know what you’re saying, even though I can’t hear you right now. We all know that the answer is LOVE. Jesus’ teachings were love. Jesus’ commandments were love. Jesus’ name, in which we baptize, is love. Obedience to Jesus is love, just as Jesus’ obedience was also love. The way Jesus taught, and not just what he taught was love.

How did Jesus make disciples? He fed people. He healed people. He dispensed justice and mercy. He taught them and liberated them and then received them when they wanted to follow him. Jesus gave us a new definition of what it means to have dominion. To have dominion over the works of God’s hands means we are responsible for caring for them. Feeding them. Healing them. Helping them live in the fullness of their belovedness and dignity. That’s how authority is wielded in the hands of those who follow Jesus. And when the blood of the murdered is crying out from the ground, followers of Jesus will wield our power to amplify that cry and transform it into a demand for justice and restoration.

It's a tall order, to recognize the whole world as our brothers and sisters and siblings and accept our responsibility to be mutual “keepers” for one another. We mortals have strong tribalistic tendencies. We prefer to circumscribe our world into smaller chunks, holding the people we already understand and respect and love. We insist “charity begins at home” when pushed to share our compassion beyond those boundaries. We have enough stress worrying about the people we’re already caring for. We forget that God is not asking us to do this ourselves. We forget that it’s Jesus’ love and authority we’re operating with here.

How can we revive our hearts and strengthen our faith so that we really could embrace the idea that we’ve got the whole world in our hands? There is a hint in another astonishing verse from Psalm 8. Here are two phrases you might not expect to hear in the same sentence: the first one is “the mouths of babes and infants” and the second one is “founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.” In case you’re not in the habit of talking about “bulwarks”, let me clarify that a “bulwark” is a defensive wall, either physical or figurative. So this complete sentence, “Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger” means that it’s the babies who are defending God’s beloveds. Does that sound too wild to be possible? In ordinary times, it might. But have you been paying attention? Because that’s exactly what’s happening. If we want to learn how to stretch our hearts to

embrace the whole world as our siblings for whom we are responsible, we need only look to the example being set for us all around the world by our young people. They are taking us there. They are organizing demonstrations and calling leaders to accountability. They are raising funds for healing and feeding and ensuring distribution is equitable. They are bearing up under the burden of high school rituals lost to pandemic and bearing the brunt of police batons.

Here's the thing about young people. We often think they aren't paying much attention. But they are listening. They hear our platitudes about love and equality and "liberty and justice for all", AND THEY BELIEVE US. They believe us even when we don't believe ourselves. They believe what we say about how the world should be and refuse to learn from our example that it's not possible to make it be that way. No, they hear our ideals that we've almost given up working toward, and they build upon them, adding complexity and nuance and power and hope to the work. They are building a bulwark against despair and injustice, with their mouths, and their arms, and their feet, and their hearts. They are accepting their role as our keepers and begging us to resume responsibility for being theirs. The whole world is in our hands, and the children are going to show us what glory and honor look like. Jesus is with us always, and now we know where to look for him. Hallelujah and Amen!