



DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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"ONLY HUMAN?"

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*"Thou has made him little less than God, and dost crown him
with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the
works of thy hands."*

(Psalm 8:5-6)

We gather here this day, toward the end of July, in the middle of summer. That means, more than likely, that the majority of you are here on vacation. You are just passing through or perhaps you are visiting someone in the Triangle area. If so, we're glad to have you here at Duke Chapel. You should be glad that this place was air-conditioned a few years ago!

Ah, the glorious summer! For those of us here, it's a much-welcomed time to catch our breath and prepare ourselves for the return of students in the fall, a time at last to read a book or to write a book we have put off until now, a time for the family. I took off for a stint of teaching and preaching in Germany. My Associate took off for a stint on the maternity ward. Summers for our family invariably have something to do with the beach. When a hot July sun rises in the sky, and the temperatures soar, how pleasant to be lying on a Carolina beach, doing absolutely nothing of any redeeming value other than doing absolutely nothing, glass of iced tea not too far away, the gentle, rhythm of waves, the occasional cry of the sea-gulls.

We also have the mountains, with their cool evenings, the throbbing songs of crickets lulling you to sleep at night -- Summer, and nature seen from a rocking chair on a porch or the side of a lake. Sitting there, rocking and enjoying, one is taught a simple truth -- this is our Father's world. Listen, on some balmy North Carolina nights you can almost hear, above the crickets and the chirping frogs, a divine voice pronounce, "Good!" over it all, just as it spoke on the first evening of creation. The Lord saw all that he had made and said, "Good!" and so say we on a July evening in a corner of God's garden called, North Carolina. Very good.

And yet, one thing we modern, air-conditioned people sometimes overlook in our vacation time assessments of nature is this: Out there, just beyond the front yard, in the woods, the little creatures are busily devouring one another! The big fishes beneath the placid surface of the lake are eating smaller fishes, who are eating still smaller fishes, who are eating protazoa, who are eating whatever they eat. Nature is not only a realm of chirping crickets and soaring gulls but is also a tooth-claw-and-nail fight to the death

for life. We humans are but the uppermost rung of a great ladder of survival, omnivores at the top of a food chain in which one organism lives only through the death of another. Something, plant or animal, suffered to bring you breakfast this morning, to say nothing of what you are planning on having for lunch.

Many mornings, as I drive to work up a portion of Highway 15/501, I follow great truck loads of chickens. Trucks of chickens, great crate-fulls of chickens, feathers flying in the roadway as they travel toward some unknown destination. I don't know where they have come from but I do know that they are not headed for a vacation. Eventually, parts of their bodies will be sold by Dinah Shore during halftime announcements at football games. Some mornings, they seem to call out to me from their crates. I wonder if I, as a caring person, should do something for them, these truck loads of chickens. But I forget them by the time I'm at Colonel Sanders' for lunch.

This world, which at once appears so benign and lovely, this creation of God which we revel in on July vacations, is also a realm of life and death where everything is eating and being eaten. So St. Paul spoke, not of how lovely creation is when seen from a screened in porch of his mountain cottage, but how creation -- groans. "The whole creation has been groaning in travail....not only the creation, but we ourselves," Paul wrote in Romans 8. "The creation was subjected to futility." Groaning. Futility. Those chickens on the trucks on 15/501. Me. You.

In the Great Chain of Being which biologists know only as a chain of food, some creature is always giving up its life for another. Those chickens, on the way to their destiny, die so that I can live. Perhaps some morning I shall flag down their truck and at least thank them for their sacrifice. In an older day, when grandmother when out into the backyard, grabbed a hen, rung her neck, and prepared her for the family's evening meal, there was probably a greater sense of the interconnectedness of all animal life, a greater sense of the dependency of humans upon other animals for the life we enjoy, perhaps even sometimes a sense of regret that so many animals and plants must die so that we can live.

All this we know. But here is a biblical assertion which we may not know: God set all this teeming creation in motion for one reason above all others -- to make human life possible. Did you hear that in the scripture today? Over time, over what we now know to have been billions of years, little by little, God coaxed from this buzzing mass of creatures a creature so like God's own self that it was said to be in the very image of God. This creature, this Adam, male and female is the crowning glory of God's creativity.

I'm talking about you. You, little Elizabeth Ferree-Clark who was born this month, and Joan of Arc, and Napoleon, George and Martha Washington, Atilla the Hun, all are in the image of God. And scripture claims that the whole creation, the crickets, gulls, frogs, and chickens on 15/501 live for our sakes. We alone enjoy such a direct relationship with God.

I suppose that sounds incredibly presumptuous or arrogant. Not so says the ancient Hebrew who, on one starlit night in July, stood on a Near Eastern hillside, gazed into the heavens and exclaimed:

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic
is thy name in all the earth!
Thou whose glory above the heaven is chanted by the mouths
of babes and infants,
...When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and stars which thou hast established;
what is humanity that thou art mindful of us,
...Yet thou hast made us little less than God,
and dost crown us with glory and honor.
Thou hast given us dominion over the works of thy hands;
thou has put all things under our feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the
earth! (Psalm 8)

Little less than God. Sure, compared to the vastness of the starry heavens, we are but small specks of matter in a great universe. But the Bible says we have no equal in all creation. Of all the creatures, we are the only ones invited to talk to, to work with God. God has given us dominion, given us the earth and told us to subdue it. Listen to Genesis: "So God created man in his own image;...male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'"

No other creature is so like God. While we don't really know precisely what "in the image of God" means, we can infer that it has something to do with dominion, with being partners with God in caring for the garden which God has planted. Genesis says that God chose not to rule the world directly. God chose not to oversee every little, tiny detail, like some insecure boss who can never let go but insists on having his hands on everything that happens in the office. God puts us in charge. Us.

And we need to be faithful stewards, not wasting any of God's creation, caring for all of God's creatures since God spent so much time and effort creating every one. Far from destroying the garden with waste and pollution, the good steward is always looking for ways to increase and enhance life in God's garden. Realizing that God has made it all for us, with loving care, believing that God has entrusted to us the maintenance of a beautiful, varied, and wonderfully rich creation, it makes a difference to us what happens to

the whooping crane, the snail darter, another human being. Some day we shall have to account to God for how we have tended the garden. Our stewardship shall be judged by the one who once bragged to Job, "Oh Job, would you look at that hippopotamus over there! How about that giraffe I built! What do you think of my donkey?" (Job 40) Life can only be taken by human beings, no matter how simple or primitive an organism it may be, with great gratitude to God for giving us such life and with reverence for the preciousness of each creature, no matter how small, to a loving Creator.

Thank you chirping crickets, croaking frogs, soaring gulls, chickens heading up 15/501, lemurs, and all the rest of you for making human life possible not only through the evolution of the species but also through your contributions to the sustenance and the diversity of human life. Scripture reminds us that we wouldn't be here without you and none of us would be here were not each of us -- frogs, crickets, mosquitoes (?), gnats (?), hippopotami, wildebeasts, bald eagles, every single human being -- important to God.

All of which may make you want to get out of the Chapel and get on with the business of doing absolutely nothing but sitting on some veranda and enjoying God's creation -- sailing some mountain lake, following a little white ball down a carpet of green, bobbing atop an innertube down some cold stream, just sitting in your front yard this afternoon. Fine. But before you go, one more word that you might not have heard if you had not come to the Chapel this July morning: You, as the human animal, male and female are at the very pinnacle of God's marvelous creation. Of all creatures, you are, in the words of the Psalmist, "Little less than God." God has put you in charge. And you might not have heard that just sitting on your veranda. Rejoice, thank God: You are human.

Isn't it interesting, whenever someone is caught in some act of violence, some moral failure, some sexual indiscretion, people inevitably say, "Well, he is only human." (We've had lots of occasions this past year to apply that phrase to clergy. "Well, it goes to show, preachers are only human.") It's meant to describe us at our immoral, bumbling worst. Only human!

And it's just that attitude that today's scripture is meant to combat. We are human! God has put us, us in charge! We are co-creators, co-workers with God. God's garden is all ours. The whole, wonderful creation exists for our livelihood, cultivation, protection and delight. We are human! Here is a great antidote to the widespread despair, self-doubt, and self-hatred which many humans feel today -- the biblical proclamation that God has created us, little less than God, the very pinnacle of all creation, and given us dominion.

We are human!

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