

## COMMAND VERSUS INVITATION

Genesis 1: 1-5, 26-28

1) The opening chapter of the bible (Genesis 1) has exerted more influence on our understanding and approach to the world as human beings than any other passage of scripture. Since we are told that we as human beings are made in the image of God, how we understand God and how God creates the world will shape our approach to the world and how we relate to it.

I remember years ago watching the great Canadian scientist and environmentalist – David Suzuki, being interviewed. He was commenting on the dangerous and destructive path we were following in the western world in relationship to our earth and atmosphere. When he was asked where the fault lay for this damaged relationship, he placed the blame on Christianity and the bible. He said that the opening chapter of the bible tells us that human beings are to control the world, dominate and subdue it just like God does when creating it. And that's what western people from Europe and spreading into North America and other parts of the world have done – controlling, dominating and subduing mother nature, and that includes animals and people too. And we have behaved this way because we believe this is God's nature too in whose image we have been created.

I remember that after hearing Suzuki speak so negatively about the bible and Christianity I felt defensive and reactive toward him. But after thinking about it some more and over the years I have come to realize that Suzuki got it right but also wrong. He got it right in describing how western peoples have behaved toward mother earth and all its creatures. Our history is clearly laid out in terms of colonialism and our current climate crisis is very much deepened by our oppressive human practices and technology. But just because Christians in the western world have read the opening chapter of the bible the way they have doesn't mean that's the only way and even the right way to read it.

2) In fact, Indigenous peoples all over the world who have read the opening chapter of the bible see in it a very different image of God and a very different approach to the world than what many of us have typically been taught growing up. And in this regard, let me offer a very important distinction when it comes to approaching other people and asking them to do things. One approach is to command them to do it, to force them to do it by threats or pressure of some kind. Command may be important and even essential when you are a soldier or on a construction site or in many other kinds of endeavour where things have to be done quickly and effectively through a chain of command. But the command approach can be detrimental if not destructive as a broad approach to relationships with others.

So what's the alternative to command? It is: invitation. To invite someone rather than command them recognizes their freedom to choose, their freedom to say yes or no, and even their freedom to bring themselves and what they have to offer to the relationship. And I would even dare to say that invitation is a better approach not only with people, but with animals and with the natural world too in many cases. As any artist will tell you, whether they work with material like wood, with paints, or a gardener with plants or a musician with music or many other ways we create something, the language of invitation is recognizing that something beautiful can come to be when we let go control and invite something or someone other into creative partnership so that we make something beautiful and good together.

The naturalist and scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer calls this: reciprocity. We give and act in a way to invite other life to give and act back to us and in this back and forth we create something far greater than anything we could create alone. This back and forth of reciprocity, moreover, is not about manipulation or the fulfillment of our agenda using others to fulfill it. No. This back and forth reciprocity is the very nature of love. Love by nature invites. It does not command. It works alongside and with other life and does not coerce, dominate or subdue them into compliance.

But what then of this opening chapter of the bible? What does it actually tell us to inspire us humans who are made in God's image? Each of the days of creation begin with God and God saying something. Traditionally, this has been interpreted as God speaking and, "poof" something is created. God is the quintessential, all-powerful commander who can give an order and, right away, it's done. "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

But there is a very different way of reading this very same sentence. The emphasis is not in God **said**, but in God **said, Let** there be... The word "let" or "yehi" in Hebrew is more invitational than commanding. And this difference also makes sense of what happens after the word "let" is spoken. Once light comes to be, God sees the light and how good it is. If God simply commanded something to be and it was done, God could be impressed with God's own brilliance or artistry like any good narcissist. But the feel of God's delight in what comes to be every day of creation is more like an artist who is amazed at something that is birthed even beyond what was imagined. It's more like God saying: "Wow! Look at what came to be from our creative collaboration! I invited you to be light and you responded by becoming light and the colour and magnificence of your brightness has astonished me. I could have gone it alone, but what has come to be from our back and forth partnership is so much more beautiful!"

God is inviting, allowing, permitting, making room for others to participate, to contribute and to partner in a common creative endeavour because creation involves all of us.

And once we get to the animals, they're invited to further participate by multiplying... not just quantity, but quality, colour and diversity is the focus... God blesses them and tells them: "Be

fruitful and multiply and fill the waters of the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And this continues with all land animals which on the 6<sup>th</sup> and final day of creation includes us humans. We are invited to multiply and fill the earth with our diversity. This requires our willingness and participation, and depending on choices we make out of love and for love in who we bond with in body and soul, the life that comes to be is as much our creation as it is God’s own. The love we share in heart and body with other life and in partnership with what God has made possible biologically brings forth new life that is always far more astonishingly beautiful than anything we could have imagined on our own.

Isn’t this all so amazing?! God and creation, God and us in a back and forth reciprocity of love is the way the world is birthed (Genesis). But now we come more specifically to the creation of human beings. God speaks something extra to us. We are told that we are made in God’s image. What’s God image as we have been given it in this first chapter? Is it command, dominate and subdue creation, or is it to invite, have responsibility and care for creation? There is a world of difference in these alternatives. Sadly in the western world we have taken the command approach. The Hebrews who composed the bible knew the difference. They suffered under command-like invasions and take-overs by great world powers, and both Jesus and Paul speak out against such command-like relations that oppress rather than liberate and enslave rather than empower people to build loving communities of reciprocity. The kingdom of God Jesus comes to inaugurate on earth as it is in heaven is about relations of reciprocal love, mutual care and tenderness. How is that possible in a world like ours?

Well, it all begins with you and me here and now. We need to create a ripple effect by how we relate to each other, to the animals and to the earth, beginning in our own sphere of relationships. By bearing witness to a kingdom of God way of relating we image a different way of being human. And despite the outcome of our ongoing drive to speed up climate change and the decrease of the multiplication of diversity of animal and plant life, what we do today and right now matters. It’s about the quality and joy of our lives now, savouring beauty despite its fragility. How may we better partner and reciprocate in love with the life around us? How may we be more creatively invitational in all our relations?

Amen.