

“Sky Sunday”

Based on Psalm 19

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When you hear the word “domination” what first comes to your mind? What feelings are triggered by that word? Maybe it’s a negative feeling. You sense a little twitch in your stomach or your heart beats a tad faster. The experience of domination, of having been dominated, can be a difficult, even painful experience, like, for example, you were bullied as a kid. On the other hand, domination may bring to mind positive experiences. You feel a different sensation in your gut, the feeling of pride or accomplishment. Say, for example, you played on a school sports team that regularly dominated the competition. Domination is a powerful word that can evoke sensations within us, positive or negative, depending on what experiences we connect with that word.

What makes the difference between positive and negative experiences of domination? It comes down to what is the intention and the effects. Let’s consider, for example, a boss and her employees. The boss is in the dominant position. She hired the employees. It is her company. Now obviously her intention is to be profitable. But, in addition, if her intent is to invest in her employees, taking care of their needs, rewarding them and building them up, making the work place enjoyable and enriching, these are all intentions that are good, that benefit the employees. This is a good kind of dominance. But if the boss only sees her employees as replaceable objects to be discarded, and whose only intent is to enrich herself, caring nothing about the well-being of her employees, this is clearly a negative form of dominance. So being in a dominant position and in a subordinate position is good or bad, depending on the intentions of the one in a dominant position and the results that follow. Dominance itself is neither good or bad. What matters is the intentions and effects of the domination. Are those subordinate to those in the dominant position cared for or hurt? The

source of domination has a responsibility to use domination in ways that are helpful rather than harmful.

Every four years, every person who is related to the annual conference in some way has to attend a healthy boundaries seminar. It is a day to focus on self-care, ethics, and a reminder of how critical it is for clergy to maintain appropriate boundaries in our relationships. One of the first subjects we talked about was the difference between boundary crossing and boundary violation. To cross a boundary is to enter into someone's space. That's something we do all the time. Shaking someone's hand, going into someone's house, gathering in this space, this is all boundary crossing. A crossing becomes a violation when your purpose and intentions are wrong. If you cross a boundary for the purpose of meeting your own need rather or with the intent to cause harm, that's a violation. Crossing boundaries are neither good nor bad. It is the purpose and intent of the crossing that can get you into trouble, and the consequences can be long lasting, as many of you who have been a part of St. Luke's for a while can attest.

We also talked about power. We were reminded that pastors have power by nature of the office we hold. In pastoral relationships, there is an unequal power balance, whether pastors acknowledge it or not. And to fail to acknowledge the power difference is not only a denial of reality but can potentially lead to great harm. Pastors need to acknowledge the power they have and determine what their purpose and intent is to use that power. Will they use the power they have to heal or hurt, to benefit others or to exploit others?

Domination, crossing boundaries, power, all of this is neutral. What makes these realities helpful or harmful depends on the purpose and intent of those involved in the relationship. I took the time to go over all this because it is helpful to keep in mind as we interpret the meaning of Psalm 19.

The psalmist begins by proclaiming that the heavens declare the glory of God, pouring out speech, without words, that declare knowledge. If you think about it, the sky and the objects in the sky have dominion over us. How so? Mainly because you and I can't control or manipulate the sky or the objects in the sky, the sun, the moon, the

planets, the stars. We can't do anything to them. We can only be impacted by them. One way to get at this is to think about the weather. We say it all the time, there's nothing we can do about the weather. We just have to deal with it. I know that attempts have been made to influence the weather, to seed clouds in order to try to make it rain. Also, global warming, of which our actions are a major contributor, is having an impact on the weather. But for the most part, the weather happens to us. We can't make the weather do what is more convenient for us. The same with the heat of the sun, and the gravitational pull of the moon; we are subject to their effects. The sun, the moon, the weather, the sky, has dominion over us. How does the sky exercise its dominion? What is its purpose and intent? It is to declare the glory of God and to communicate knowledge to us.

What is that knowledge? What does the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars tell us without words? Those who practice astrology would say that the sun, moon, and planets give us knowledge about ourselves, our personalities, and what situations we can anticipate occurring, what we need to pay attention to. The skies tell us what season we are in, when to plant and when to harvest. The Old Farmers Almanac has a table that lists when are the best times to do all sorts of things based on where the moon is in the sky. So for today, Sept. 16th, this is a good day to straighten your hair, go camping (glad you chose to be here instead), prune bushes and pour concrete. The sky tells us when are the best times to go fishing. The rule of thumb is to go at sunrise or sunset during a full moon, which is when fish tend to be more active. So that's the knowledge that the sky gives us. And all of this knowledge is certainly for our benefit so that we can live better. The sky uses its dominion over us to give us knowledge of when to do certain things so that our lives will be enriched. This is a good use of dominion.

The psalmist then gets specific, describing the activity of the sun. The sun, of course, dominates the sky during the day. As the psalmist says, nothing can escape from its heat. The sun takes its daily route with haste and with joy. As the psalmist poetically describes it, the sun sleeps at night with his beloved in the tent God has provided for him. And then in the morning the sun springs out of his tent with strength and runs his

path across the sky, just as God has purposed. He runs the course of his day so that he can return to his tent where his beloved is waiting for him. And we all receive the benefit of the sun's route. Life itself depends on the energy of the sun. The sun is a great example of a positive form of domination. We can't control the sun. We are subject to the sun's effects. But they are good effects, necessary for life. We benefit from the sun's domination of the sky.

The psalmist then moves to a description of God's ordinances and all the benefits that go with it. Let's rehearse all the benefits we receive from the domination of God's ordinances: they revive the soul, make us wise, rejoice our hearts, enlighten our eyes, and endure forever. The ordinances are right and just, more precious than gold and more sweet than the honey that drips from the honeycomb. Far from having the purpose of weighing us down or intending to do us harm, God's ordinances are life giving. Subjecting ourselves to the domination of God's ordinances, says the psalmist, grants us benefit over benefit. Just like the sun, God's ordinances are an example of positive dominion.

Then, the psalmist prays that God would protect her from the insolent. It is here that we find the subject of dominion directly, in vs. 13. Who are these people that the psalmist wants God to prevent from having dominion over her? Surely these are people who use their power over people for the purpose of self-gratification and to do harm to those subject to them. They use their dominion in ways opposite to the dominion of the sky, the sun, and God's ordinances. And notice that the psalmist pleads for God to be the deliverer, to keep the insolent back. She acknowledges that some people, and I would say, some systems of power, are beyond our control. We need God to intervene, to release us from the people or systems of power whose domination does harm.

What do I mean by people or systems of power that dominate us? One example could be our food system. Industrial agriculture dominates our food supply. Just walk into a grocery store. On one side is where you can buy produce, which is actual food. But the central shelves of the store are filled with heavily processed so called foods. Earlier this week I was hosting my clergy cluster here at the church and I wanted to make some fresh baked breads. I got a box of blueberry muffin mix, the one

that comes with a small tin of blueberries to fold into the batter. When I opened the can to rinse the blueberries, let me just say they didn't look like blueberries to me. They were a reddish purple color, uniform in shape and half the size of real blueberries. They looked like frankenberries to me. I chose to make the blueberry muffins anyway. Sure, I could have made the blueberry muffins from scratch. But the flour I would have used would have come from genetically modified wheat that is nothing like it would have been 100 years ago and would have been doused in Roundup. Don't even get me started on the factory farms that our chicken and pork products come from. You get the point. We are subject to a food system designed to maximize profits while doing harm to our bodies. I believe we need delivered from this domination. With God's help we need to fundamentally change how we feed ourselves so that all of us can thrive. And God is our help. As the psalmist says, God is our rock and redeemer. God can redeem us from all the systems of domination we are under that are harming us. I don't know where else to place my hope than in the power of God to redeem, to save, to transform.

I can't end this message about dominion without mentioning the commandment God gave to Adam and Eve to have dominion over the earth. We obviously can't have any impact on the heavens, on the sun and the moon. But we definitely impact the earth. We can cultivate and shape it. We can work with the earth to enhance its capacity to bring forth life. Through sustainable farming methods we can replenish the soil in healthy ways that not only produce for us healthier food but also enriches and improves the soil itself. Or we can pave it over, use farming methods that slowly sap away the fertility of the soil, extract whatever of value we can get from a place and then move on. Having considered both positive and negative dominion, how do you understand the commandment God has given us as human beings to have dominion over the earth? It is certainly a huge responsibility God has given us, to be about the work of blessing the earth rather than exploiting the earth for our own purposes. Do we not need God's forgiveness for how we have not always exercised our dominion in the proper way? As the psalmist says, we need God to cleanse us from our hidden faults, for

often we aren't even aware of how our actions in daily life are doing harm to the earth. In spite of our individual and collective failure to exercise our dominion responsibly, there is hope for us that we can do better. So I have a little assignment for you today. Sometime this afternoon, I invite you to sit with this question: how will I acknowledge and manifest my dominion today? I'm thinking of dominion in a broader context than just our relationship with the earth. What about your dominating human relationships, for example as a parent, as a supervisor or boss, a teacher, or any other relationship in which you have more power? You do have areas of your life where you are in the dominant position. How will you exercise that power today?