Seeking the Integrity of Creation
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Catherine: Over the next four days, our Bible studies will focus particularly on two texts, one from the prophet Ezekiel and the other from the Gospel of Matthew. These will form, in a sense, the backbone of the studies, but we will also bring in several other passages. Because of the centrality to our study of these two portions of Scripture, they have been printed in your booklets. If you turn to them during these study times, it would be helpful, since we will frequently refer to specific verses.

The Gospel text is quite familiar—a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. The Ezekiel passage is probably less familiar, but it contains images that run throughout the Bible—images of the shepherd, the sheep and the goats, the righteous prince or king. The Matthew text speaks of masters and slaves, of a kingdom, of God as a provident father.

The passages come from widely separate times. In fact, almost five hundred years pass between the prophet and Jesus. And yet, the cultures in which they were written are far more alike than either is to our own culture.

Some of the images are familiar to us: We know of fathers, and slavery existed in our own society all too recently. There are monarchs in our day. Shepherds may be the most unfamiliar image to us. But the familiarity of the others needs to be taken very carefully. In an ancient,

traditional society, kings were no ceremonial figureheads. They had real power—often enormous power. Granted, in Israel, the power of the king was limited by the law of God and by the role of priests and prophets. The power of fathers and of masters was likewise limited. The law was not always followed, however.

But when Ezekiel spoke, the divided nation had already suffered disaster. The northern kingdom of Israel had long since fallen and disappeared. The southern kingdom of Judah had just been conquered. A king whose power knew no limits had taken many captives back to Babylon, and other Jews had fled as exiles to Egypt. Kings were no ceremonial figureheads. They conquered and despoiled nations. At the time of Jesus—and when the Gospel of Matthew was written–, Judea was under a different domination—that of Rome. The Roman emperor was no figurehead either. Kings were real—and their power was real.

Fathers had real power also. Both in law and in tradition there was no equality of power between husband and wife, father and mother. Clearly, the role of the father was to provide for the household and govern its affairs.

We obviously rejoice in the changes that have occurred in society, many inspired by the Gospel message itself. We do not live in a traditional, ancient society. We hold to democratic ideals in our public life as well as in the home. We do not have kings—or even queens—who hold the power those ancient monarchs did. We do not have slaves and masters. The role of fathers has

also changed, at least in some cases. In this we rejoice. But the texts we are studying are set in a very different context. In order to see what they are saying, we need to see them there. Once we have done that, then we can move the message to our own day and circumstances.

That leaves the shepherd. Our urban society has little place for such work. Even in rural areas of our country where sheep are still raised, the methods of caring for them are modern. But there are places in the world where shepherds continue to follow in fairly ancient patterns. Sheep need constant changes in pasture, because they eat the grass to its roots and kill off the new growth if left in one place. So, they must move constantly. No simple fencing will help. And in such moving, there are dangers from which they must be protected.

Even in places like Spain and Portugal today one can see shepherds guarding flocks that are eating the grass on the roadside as they slowly move from one farm to another to clean fields that have been harvested. Movement is constant. And the shepherd needs to guard them from cars on the highway, from getting into the wrong field, as well as from the traditional dangers of animals, floods, and falls. Constant vigilance and constant movement are the lot of a good shepherd.

With this basic introduction, let us now turn to the passages printed in your booklets, turning first to the section from the 34th chapter of Ezekiel.

Justo: As we read this passage, two pronouns stand out. First of all, there is a clear insistence on God's activity, underlined by the repetition of the first-person singular: *I myself will be the shepherd; I will make; I will seek; I will bring back; I will bind up; I will strengthen; I will destroy; I will feed; I shall judge*; etc.

Ultimately, the subject of this entire passage is God. It is God who creates; it is God who demands; it is God who judges; it is God who promises. Although the passage certainly refers to Israel, as we shall see in a moment, it is not primarily about Israel but rather about the God whose actions, whose love, and whose judgment are seen in the life of Israel.

This, which is true of this particular passage, is also true of Scripture as a whole. The Bible is not primarily about us but about God; not primarily about what we ought to do, but about what God is doing.

Naturally, who this God is and what this God does says much about who we are and what we ought to do. And it is for this reason that another pronoun appears so prominently in our text: the second-person plural: you*. As for you, my flock, is it not enough for you to feed, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; when you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet; you pushed; with your horns; you scattered*; etc.

The divine action demands a human response, and this is what the Bible is all about.

It is important to point out, however, that this "you" is the second-person plural. In modern English, we no longer have a way to distinguish between the singular and the plural "you." This becomes quite difficult for the two of us sometimes, when someone calls our home and says to one of us, "we would like to invite you to speak at such and such a time and such and such an event." In the course of the conversation, we somehow have to manage to discover whether "you" means one or both of us.

The difference between the two is crucial for our planning! And it is even more important for our understanding of the Bible. Because we no longer have a plural "you" in English, when we see such a word in the biblical text we tend to interpret it in the singular, as addressed privately to each one of us. This leaves out the communal dimension that is so important to the biblical witness.

In the case of this text from Ezekiel, it is clear that the "you" is plural. The words are not addressed so much to each of us as individuals as they are addressed to Israel and to us as a people. Israel is being called; we are being called to respond to God's actions and God's promises, not only by our own, private, individual actions but also by the way in which our life as a people is organized.

The same is true, although not as obvious, of the passage in Matthew. When that passage says, “Why do you worry about clothing,” that "you" is not a singular, privatistic "you." It is plural. It is

addressed, not only at individual Christians but also at the community of faith as a whole.

Catherine: There is a very interesting shift in the passage from Ezekiel. After all the verses that stress "I"—from God's perspective—and those that stress "you"—in which we are addressed—there is the change to a third person singular in verse 23—and at that point the people, who before were addressed directly as "you," become the third-person plural, in other words, the flock of God, "they." The change comes when God speaks of the shepherd whom God will put over the flock, the servant-prince David.

David had been the great king. He had been dead for about five hundred years when these words were written. He had not been perfect--far from it. But he had listened to God. He had repented when he sinned. He had been a good and faithful shepherd to God's people. God had promised a restoration of the line of David, a line of faithful shepherds for Israel, when the kingdom would be brought again to its fullness.

There are several points that concern us here. First of all, this faithful shepherd is a human being who exercises God's rule in the midst of the people. The shepherd is faithful only by adhering to God's word. God's concern is the life of the whole community. Structures are needed for such a life. Political and economic institutions, courts where justice is carried out. All of this is part of the communal life of the people. Under a traditional monarchy, it is the king who is responsible for these institutions. In regard to these issues, David had been a good king.

But he is not the only example in Scripture of God's use of human beings as shepherds of the people, of human beings through whose righteous actions God's care and concern for the people is carried out.

Think of the story of Joseph in Egypt. God had placed him in a situation in which he could help the pharaoh organize the economic life of the people so that when the seven years of famine came, the people would have enough food. Paul wrote to the Roman Christians that governments have been established by God for the good of the people. The shepherd of whom Ezekiel writes is just such an official—one who governs—a faithful human being who in some fashion exercises God's own rule in the midst of the kingdom.

But what shall we do with such an image in our own time? We do not have a king, but governments still have the role of ruling justly and righteously. Nor were all of these shepherds part of the people of God. Paul was speaking of the Roman Empire, not a Jewish or Christian state. The Egyptian pharaoh under whom Joseph labored was not an Israelite.

The passage from Ezekiel is not simply about how we should act as a religious community. It also deals with the wider structures and institutions that really govern our lives as the larger society. It speaks about the political and economic institutions of our society, about our courts and social services. To what degree in these wider institutions do the fat sheep push aside the lean; those who have had their fill muddy the waters and trample the pastures for those who

are hungry? These are questions that Ezekiel asks us.

The second point is that the shepherd is a visible connecting link between God and the whole people. It is through the shepherd that God will save the people and let them dwell safely. Look at the very first verse that is printed from Ezekiel: God says, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." And we know that in the New Testament, Jesus is viewed both as the fulfillment of the promise of a new and final king in the line of David and as the good and true shepherd. The image of the shepherd and the king make it very clear that God is not distant from the people but is able to work and move in their midst, using human agents at times, but, finally, in Jesus, actually coming into our midst, in one who is fully God and also fully human; one who is the faithful God shepherding and ruling and the faithful human being obedient to God, all in one person, Jesus of Nazareth.

The Matthew passage also speaks of a king and of a kingdom. It speaks of the glory of King Solomon, David's son, who built up a magnificent court and Temple but so ruined the public life of the people that the kingdom divided as soon as he died. But it speaks above all of the final rule or reign or kingdom of God, when all is as it should be. It is this rule that Jesus proclaims and carries out.

So, Ezekiel and Matthew both speak of how we as the flock are to live under the guidance of the faithful shepherd. In many ways, the passages are parallels. God, the ultimate shepherd, speaks in both passages. Both speak of how we are to relate to the creation around us and how we are

to live with each other.

Justo: In this entire dialogue, however, there is another party that is always present: the rest of creation. In the passage from Ezekiel, it is represented by the references to the soil, to the wild animals, to the woods, and to the showers and the fruit that come in their season. In the passage from Matthew, it is represented by the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

This is more than romantic imagery. It is a fundamental aspect of the biblical view of what it means to be human. As you know, in the early chapters of the book of Genesis there are two accounts of creation. These two accounts differ somewhat as to the order in which various elements in the universe are created. But they agree, in that the earth is created before humankind. The proper context for human life is the rest of creation.

Actually, in one of those stories, the one that appears in Genesis 2, we are told that humankind is made out of dirt. In Genesis 2:7, we read that "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."

Look again at that text. Nowhere does this text, or any other text in the Bible, indicate that there is something wrong with being made out of earth. That we are more than earth is clear from the text. But it is also clear that, no matter what else we might be, we are earth. This is why God later declares, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." The second part of that saying, death, is obviously the result of sin. But the first part, "you are dust," is no more than a

statement of what was already declared in Genesis 2:7. Being made out of dirt is not part of the curse. It is part of the original creation. It is good.

Actually, being made out of earth is so important to understanding who we are, that in Genesis 2:7 there is a play on words that does not come across in our present English translation: God made ‘*adham*, the human, out of *adhamah*, the earth. Perhaps we could say in English that human comes from "humus," not only etymologically but literally.

Sometimes we find it difficult to accept this, because we have been influenced by all sorts of extra-biblical traditions that affirm that somehow the human problem is that we are made out of earth, that we are material. But that is not what the Bible says.

From its very first chapters, the Bible affirms our kinship with the earth. We are not spiritual beings temporarily sojourning here. We are made of earth, and the breath of God does not destroy but rather affirms that earthy creation which we are.

There is a somewhat different creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. There we are told that, when creating humankind, God said, "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (1:26). These words have often been interpreted as giving

human beings *carte blanche* in their dealings with the earth. Since we are to have dominion, we are free to do with the earth as we please. Critics of Christianity have correctly pointed out that such a view, which has often been associated with Western civilization and with a Christian worldview, is at the root of our present ecological crisis.

On the other hand, a closer examination of the Genesis account would correct the notion that we are free to do as we please in our dealings with nature. First of all, the very verse that speaks of human dominion over creation puts that dominion in a certain context: "Let us make the human in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion..." The dominion is after the likeness of God's dominion. And God's dominion is dominion in love. God does not rule the earth and humankind as a tyrant. God's very nature is love, and that is also the nature of the divine dominion. It follows, therefore, that our dominion over the earth is not that of an autocrat but rather a dominion in love.

There is no question that humankind has enormous powers over the earth. What is surprising is that this was known as early as the time when these words were written, long before the development of modern technology. But given the fact of that power, the biblical author sets a limit to it: It is power to be used after the likeness of God's power. It is a creative and sustaining power. Our dominion over creation is a power to be used in a like manner as, and in the image of, the power that has created us and still sustains us.

To this we can then add what we have learned from the other creation narrative: We are made of earth. That means that we do not stand over against nature, as outsiders. On the contrary, we are part of nature. We are not higher beings that can look upon nature with utter detachment. When we look at nature, we look at ourselves, for we are part of it. One aspect of the goodness of God's creation is that we are made out of earth—of the same earth that in our sinful madness we undervalue and pollute. We are tied to the earth by an umbilical cord, and whatever good or evil we do to it we do to ourselves.

This is important also for our interpretation of the Matthew passage. That passage is often interpreted to mean that things such as food, clothing, shelter, and the like are not important. That is not at all what the text says. On the contrary, what it says is that the body itself is more important than what we wear, and that there is more to life than food. But then it goes on to say that these things are so important that God takes care of them. The grass of the field might seem unimportant to us, because today it is alive and tomorrow it is thrown in the oven. The birds of the air might seem unimportant, because they are so small and fleeting. Yet, these things are so important that God dresses the lilies and feeds the birds. The reason why we are not to be concerned about these things is, not that they are unimportant, but on the contrary, that they are so important that our heavenly Parent knows that we have need of them.

To destroy unnecessarily the birds of the air is to destroy creatures so important that they are fed by the Creator of the universe. To undervalue the beauty of the lilies is to undervalue garments that not even Solomon could equal.

We are part of God's creation. We are tied to the earth by an umbilical cord. To undervalue and to destroy the earth is to destroy ourselves and to undervalue the God who created us, who feeds the birds of the air and who clothes the lilies of the field.

Catherine: Both the Matthew and the Ezekiel passages make clear that through this material creation, of which we are a part, God has provided that which we need in order to survive. It is God who has given us what we need for food, for shelter, for clothing. In a certain sense, therefore, we must treat creation not only as that to which we are closely related but as a gift from God to us. In Ezekiel we have the image of the sheep who not only use what they need but ruin what they do not need so that the others lack even necessities. In Matthew we have the image of God who gives all creatures—the grass, the lilies, the birds, human beings—what they need to survive.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, which in Matthew is found shortly before the section printed in your booklet and also in chapter 6, we ask God for our daily bread. In fact, the verses we are dealing with can be considered a commentary on that prayer. To ask God for daily bread does

not mean that we expect such bread to come to us in some way other than through the creation that surrounds us. God supplies our needs through creation. It is God's gift and must be treated as such. God supplies our needs, not individual but communal. God's gift of the creation does not preclude our ordering our public life sinfully so that some have enough, and others do not. That is what the Ezekiel passage is all about. God has supplied, but we have so organized our corporate human life that the good gifts of God are not available to all the human family. We have not treated the rest of creation as the gift that it is.

There is another matter that needs to be mentioned. When the imagery of plants and animals is used, as the sheep in the Ezekiel text or the lilies and the birds in Matthew, the provision by God through nature is direct. Sheep do not create irrigation ditches or dams to control water supplies. And as the Matthew verses say directly, the lilies do not spin their beautiful dress, nor do the birds have farms and barns. This does not mean that human beings are simply to sit back and let nature take its course as far as they are concerned. One of the great contrasts between human beings and other creatures is the development of agriculture and other forms of technology. Even in the creation story in Genesis 2, once Adam is created, he is given the task of "tilling and keeping" the garden. It was a garden, not a wild area. It required care, cultivation, planting, harvesting, pruning, weeding, and all the other things that agriculture involves.

In Matthew, there is the contrast between the lilies and the birds, on the one hand, that do not need to do these things, and yet God supplies their need, and human beings who do such

things. God supplies our needs as well. We will deal much more with Matthew later, but the message is not to sit back and do nothing and food and clothing will fall in your lap.

It is God who supplies our daily bread. It comes as wheat that through human labor is turned into bread. The birds may eat wild wheat directly, but human beings cultivate it, harvest it, grind it, make bread out of it, and bake it. The Matthew passage is not saying to stop doing those things and live like the birds. It is speaking of the context of justice in which those activities are to take place. Ezekiel also speaks of the need for a social order in which the good gifts of God are available for all rather than only for the strong who take what they need and then ruin the rest so that the weaker members of the flock have nothing.

Justo: Thus, while God provides for us through the created order, it is also true that we have an obligation toward that order. We are to eat from the garden, but we are also to care for the garden. The dominion given at the time of creation certainly does not mean that we can do with nature as we choose, but it also means that we cannot simply sit back and let nature take its course. The noble savage, who lives in perfect harmony with nature by simply gathering fruit from the trees, may be a very attractive ideal, but this is not the biblical vision of what it means to be human. The so-called developer, who sees in every beach and every marsh an opportunity to make money, may be a contemporary hero, but that also is not the biblical vision of what it means to be human. To be human, according to the Bible, is to be part of nature, made of earth,

unable to escape or to deny the umbilical cord that ties us to the soil, and yet to have dominion and responsibility for the rest of creation: We must not avoid either one. Dominion must not lead to the abuse of creation. But we cannot abdicate from the position of dominion and responsibility in which God has placed us.

How, then, are we to determine the proper use of such dominion? It is at this point that the subject of justice comes in. That is the subject for tomorrow's Bible study, in which we shall delve more deeply into these two passages from Ezekiel and Matthew, as well as into others.