

**18th Sunday after Pentecost  
September 22, 2024**

**HUBRIS  
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HUBRIS. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines HUBRIS as exaggerated pride or self confidence. The word hubris comes from the Greek, and was used in tragedies, and stories of the Gods of Olympus as a human trait that leads to downfall.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus has again prophesied that he will go to Jerusalem, where he will be arrested, crucified and then rise after three days. Mark notes that "they did not understand him but were afraid to ask." That's not the only thing they were afraid of. Jesus then asks them what they had been arguing about on the road, and they remain silent. Mark doesn't tell us, but I can picture red faces and averted eyes. They had been arguing about who would be greatest. Hubris.

Jesus then does something that has been a favorite in Christian art through the ages. He takes a child in his arms, and says to the disciples that they must welcome all as children. In Jesus' time, children were in the stratus of society with the least power. And this is the point. Following Jesus cannot be a quest for power.

We understand this story implicitly. After all, None of us here is immune from the temptation to make more of ourselves than we ought. The dangers are many. Firstly social. Jesus himself points this out in one of his banquet parables, with the caution that one ought to take a lower seat and be invited to a higher status, than face the shame of being asked to vacate a position that is, in the eyes of the host, above their station.

But another, more serious danger is that we can be led to assume too much, take too much for granted, and worse, position ourselves as above and outside what Thomas Jefferson referred to as "nature and its laws." In other words, we are tempted to see ourselves as apart from, and above the created order.

We read in Genesis, God speaking to First Man and First Woman:

(Gen 1: 28 ff). 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. ....

When we humans have read this, we have heard it all too often as sanction from God, as a command to DOMINATE the whole of the world rather than have dominion over our fellow creatures. And we humans have understood, wrongly, that God has given

permission to take, possess, use, consume and destroy as we see fit, without regard to the *obligation of justice* to share equally and preserve for the future.

Is this an overstatement? Let's consider the story of our "bird of the week," the California Condor.

About ten years ago or so. Margo and I had taken a drive to Monterey for a walk along the seashore. We decided to drive further south to Point Lobos. (As an aside, if you've never been to Point Lobos, a couple of miles south of Carmel, add it to your to-do list. It's quite amazing!). Somewhere near our turnoff, I saw, sitting on some fence posts, several vultures. There must have been an animal carcass nearby. One of the birds was quite large, and on its wing there was affixed a disk, or medallion on which was printed a number. I wondered if it was a California Condor.

A few years later, during a vacation in my hometown of San Diego, we visited the Wild Animal Park in Escondido, an annex of the San Diego Zoo. There we saw a very large aviary that is a breeding center for California condors. All of the birds we saw had these medallions with numbers. What I had seen at Point Lobos was indeed a condor. I later learned that the breeding center releases birds near Pinnacles, Grand Canyon, and Zion National Parks.

I recognize that I am privileged to have seen a condor outside of a zoo. They were declared extinct in the wild in 1987 when the few remaining birds were captured and provided to the San Diego and Los Angeles zoos to establish a captive breeding program. Beginning in 1991 birds began to be released. Breeding in the wild is happening, and the numbers *have* increased, but the fate and future of the world's largest vulture remains on the brink, as the most recent census, in 2023 estimates the total population of Condors in the wild at only 560 birds!

Why the decline to the point of extinction? Extinction is not a rare or unheard-of phenomenon, but in every instance, there are causes natural or otherwise. In the case of the California condor, it was a combination of the effects of agricultural chemicals, principally but not solely DDT, and human predation.

These two causes I cited are different, but both are the result of human activity. And this is not the only example of human caused extinction.

Starting with human predation, I am certainly not the only person who is perplexed by the impulse some act on to kill large or rare animals, not for food or other use, but simply for the thrill of exercising power over these creatures or the desire to display a trophy of their dominance over nature. Another example from American history is the destruction of the American Bison. In the 1860's it is estimated that the population of bison exceeded sixty million head. Within a span of ten years from the early 1870's through the beginning of the 1880's, the bison population was reduced to a documented total of around 260 animals in three small remnant herds. The rationale for the

massacre is dark and complicated. The driving reason was the market for bison hides. American bison hide has the property of being exceedingly rugged. Most American industrial machinery in the steam age was driven by bison hide belts. But in addition to this utilitarian need, it was in 1879 that an Army general was quoted in the press to the effect that “behind every dead buffalo lies a dead Sioux warrior.”

Unlike the willful killing of animals, the other catastrophic factor in the near extinction of the condor and the endangerment of the bald eagle and other related raptors was the widespread use of DDT in agriculture. The side effects of DDT were unanticipated. DDT was first formulated in 1874. In the early 1900's the insecticidal power of DDT was discovered.

During the Second World War it was recognized that vector-borne illnesses had the potential to derail the war effort. DDT was pressed into service to address the need to control these illnesses, principally malaria and typhus. Lice were a vector of typhus, and beginning in 1942, the United States Army began widespread delousing of military personnel, prisoners of war as well as civilians. This was performed widely in all theaters of operation and it was indeed effective in controlling typhus.

Shortly after the end of the war, DDT entered the marketplace as an effective insecticide, and used very widely. The exigencies of war had pushed the military to use this deadly chemical without sufficient, if any research into side effects, both on humans and the rest of nature. Post war, concern was raised about the effect of DDT on the endocrine system. However, the chemical was powerfully effective for its intended purpose, and the agricultural and chemical industries fought ferociously to preserve the ability to use DDT to decrease product loss to insects. In 1957, there was a fight in the courts in New York State over the use of DDT in the apple industry, that was the catalyst for Rachel Carson to write her book “Silent Spring,” which served to launch the modern “ecology movement.”

Back to the notion of hubris. These stories are instances of lack of insight into consequences of human activity based on assumptions that the resources of nature are boundlessly extensive and the health of the natural world is impervious to anything that humans do. This is sheer arrogance! I shared two examples. To these I could add the near extinction of the grey wolf, and the brown bear due to large predator eradication efforts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the near extinction of the large whales, the over-fishing of tuna. The list is endless.

And now we are increasingly aware of the effects of global warming. So we *do* know better now. Or at least we should. But it is another trait of human nature that we are in constant need of being reminded. A purpose of what we have been doing these past few weeks is to reflect deeply and solidify our sense of individual and corporate responsibility. It is good that we dedicate this portion of our liturgical year to celebrate God's creation, reflect on our place in the created order, and recommit ourselves to mindful living.

I have enjoyed our weekly bird stories. My story took a dark tone, I admit. But I believe we need to be constantly reminded that what we do and what we don't do, has consequences; that the mistakes of the past have been devastating. But it is not too late for repentance and change.

If we continue this work of weaving a healthy theology of creation into our religious lives and consciences, we will help spread a Gospel-centered ethos of reverence for all of God's creation.

I pray the effect of this work may result in it becoming less of a rare occurrence to spot a California condor sitting on a country fence post near Carmel, or see with our own eyes a blue whale breaching off of Santa Cruz, or a grey wolf roaming Yellowstone National Park, and be moved to deep gratitude at the beauty of God's creation and our place in it.

Amen.