

“Thriving, or Surviving?”  
 Sermon for 24 February 2019  
 Text: Genesis 1:20-22, 27-28

All good gifts around us  
 Are sent from heaven above  
 Then thank the Lord  
 O thank the Lord for all his love.

“All good gifts around us” starts us off on the right foot. We are tremendously gifted, God has showered us with good gifts. They are good and they are gifted to us. And these gifts flow from who God is. Out of his love, we receive kindness, mercy and grace. Out of his righteousness we receive the pure, the good and the holy. Out of his justice we receive justice, the ability to judge motives and intentions, the capacity to establish what is good, right, true and equitable. All are love gifts. All should swell our hearts with gratitude and elevate our souls with hope.

In this frame of mind, let us turn to yet another gift, the gift of his word and let's pay particular attention to this saying, on the fifth day: **God created the great sea creatures and everything that moves . . . And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth.”** My sense is that God has created an envelope here, in this blessing, so as to cover every living thing—except human kind. We had not been formed as yet. However, after we were created, God invoked a similar, but expanded blessing: **“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 heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.** Both blessings start the same, but they end differently. That's striking, important. After we are charged to **fill the earth**, we are further mandated to **subdue the earth** and to exercise **dominion** over fish, fowl, every living thing, in our subjugation of the earth.

So I ask you, “Are we here to survive, or here to thrive?” I vote for thrive and I want to suggest that there is a world of difference between surviving and thriving. The mindset of survival is fraught with fear, with struggle and conflict, with selfishness and greed. And this is the natural mindset, this represents the life concerns of the worldly. On the other hand, those who ascribe to thriving are full of hope, generosity and promise. These mindsets generate very, very different visions. Not only do they see the world as it is differently, they embrace radically opposite motivations—survivalists tend towards selfishness and thrivers embrace generosity, sharing and promise. The former are frantic and pessimistic, the latter are more trusting, optimistic and constructive. Survivalists see the world as a closed system, with limited resources that are running out (and you had better grab all you can while you can) whereas the thrivers acknowledge their dependence of divine provision, and by faith they believe that life will continue as long as God chooses to extend it to us.

Some folk say, we're all dying and we must save ourselves. Others affirm that we ought to live life while we have life and that we should do so knowing that there is more to life than mere survival on this good earth. I look out my window. I see the

sky, the encroaching woods and the shrinking fields. I notice that the wildness of nature is overtaking the cleared land. We are surrounded by some 90 acres of pasture. Each spring the farmer who raises meat critters delivers his cattle to that field and they thrive there, all summer, grazing and growing. We hear, see and smell them. It's a good thing. I am so pleased that someone still sees the promise, the power in the land and thrives off it. Free range beef is fine commodity. Raising beef is a worthy occupation.

Thriving is a beautiful thing.

It is not an inevitable thing. It takes planning, execution of the plan. There has to be feed, water, insect repellents and, perhaps, veterinary care. The land has to be subdued, fenced, mown and maintained. What we are talking about is dominion. Without the farmer the cattle would not **be fruitful and multiply**; they would not fulfill their mandate *and the farmer would not be fulfilling his*. As you know we have a berry farmer and vegetable grower in our midst—there would be fewer raspberries and broccoli heads if they were not cultivating the soil, propagating plant life, sowing seeds *and bringing them to harvest*. The seedlings and plant life would not fulfill their mandate and the growers wouldn't either! And we, their customers and consumers, would languish and pine if not perish. I could go on to mention that apple orchards of Winthrop—not just cattle, not berries or garden produce, but hundreds of varieties of apples. The best in the country, if not the world! We built apples barrels out of white oak processed in our shoo factories and sent them by our boat and barges down the waterways, to the ocean and off to overseas markets. Thrivers exercising their dominion power undertook these things, in the main; they had the vision and built it.

Maine is a great place to raise cattle, to grow food! It's a great place to flourish. Then, there's our water resource. In the early nineteen hundreds, there were five (at least) factories running off the water in our streams! We exported tablecloths to the world, and leather boots to the army—we had a grain mill, and a grist mill and the village housed woolen mills that produced fine cloth well into the twentieth century. Have the streams lost their power? Why all this squandering? IS the best and only use of it swimming and boating and cooling one's feet—recreational uses have eclipsed the productive uses? Why? What's wrong with power plants, inland fisheries and by-pass sluiceways for recreation and for safe passage of migrating native fish stock? Isn't there an abundance of water, of water power, of economic opportunity? Isn't there more than enough for everyone to thrive? Yes, Maine is a great place for boating—but fishing and dangling our feet doesn't exhaust the potential of boats. There is hardly a cleaner, or quieter mode of transportation than the current of a river! Ferries and shopping are compatible. But not if you have let the waterways go. Think of the jobs generated by service and support of canals. Railroads are still more efficient than eighteen wheelers for some freight needs.

East Winthrop used to be a destination. People used to visit here from all over the Northeast, by horse, by coach, by steamboat and trains. They came for summer break and to visit Island Park. Island Park was where the biggest and best bands would play—people would flock to laugh, dance, sing and socialize together. That did wonders for the local economy—it attached the village to Augusta and to

downtown Winthrop! The boarding houses hired help, restaurants fed our guests and hired help to do so. Local markets thrived even more than they do now. The summer population of East Winthrop, rivaled the rest of the town year round! And although entertainment isn't productive like farming, or milling . . . it is an expression of human thriving! It remains optimistic, expansive; it isn't stingy, it is outward not inward. Summer guests may have come to survive the urban heat of Boston, or New York; but they were not survivalists. Nor were the Woolworths whose estate lay near at hand! There was a pervasive sense that this place is a good place on the good earth. What a blessing!

But thriving doesn't just happen any more than cattle organize themselves to spend the summer in our pasture! We are here for that!

Let me remind you that we began with "All good gifts around us" and not a script from the Winthrop Chamber of Commerce! That we are talking about thriving versus surviving. *That we are looking at the blessings downstream from God's love—everything God does flows from his being.* That I am talking about kindness, mercy and grace, about the pure the good and the holy, about justice, rightness and equity. I am not focused on grass-fed beef, apple exports or local manufacturing per se. But I am talking about a mindset, a hopeful, optimistic mindset—one which fosters creativity, generosity and productivity. I am suggesting that sharing is superior to hoarding and that these attitudes revolve around the ***understanding that God is good***, that God blesses us and that being fruitful and multiplying, that filling and subduing, that exercising dominion is good; it's about thriving. That when Jesus said that he came **to bring us life and that abundantly** he was speaking both to eternal life and to existential thriving. Re-imagine your locality, re-envision yourself. Receive permission to dream big again: to build, to develop, to produce. We were created to be creative, productive . . . to work. That permission resides in our mandate as written in the Bible.

This is a very far cry from the survival of the fittest, the "might makes right," inherently selfish, natural selection presuppositions that dominate worldly thinking. Take the recent decision of Amazon to not locate it's corporate offices in New York City. They cited a hostile business climate. Amazon appears to have wanted a place to grow, but they were framed ***as a greedy corporation that only comes to take***. Some of the opposition are like farmers that eat their seed corn. Unwilling to await the harvest, or perhaps unwilling to work the soil and cultivate the seed—they wanted the money right now for low income housing. The longer process of awaiting the 37 billion in generated taxes over the next ten years, from high paying jobs, was not acceptable. The general uplift of the city's economy was insufficient for those who hate corporate wealth and deem all investments as robbery. That is a survivalist mindset! Some people are so fixated on the present that they happily cannibalize the future. Thrivers take the longer view. It seems hard to persuade a survivalist of the benefits of delayed gratification. They are takers. The glass is half empty and they want it all now. Thrivers, who practice dominion, see the half empty glass and work to fill it up. They are givers. The thrivers are multipliers, survivalists are depleters.

What's the point? Why do we at East Winthrop Baptist Church need to pay attention to our Creation mandate? Because we have yet to fulfill it. **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 heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth** has much to do with how we face the future. I mean as a church. And as residents, as citizens and as Mainers, it affects how we look at our selves, our land, our opportunities, our resources.

It impacts how we view the role of the church. For example, we should be on the side of the thrivers. The creators, the inventors, the entrepreneurs. Why? Because filling the earth requires it . . . because subduing the earth demands it . . . because the exercise of dominion upon which thriving depends upon our mandate. It is part of who we are, of who we are created to be; it is our orders, as it were, from God. They have not changed.

The Creation mandate alters how we view our very selves. It explains why we are here, what we are to do because of who we are. There is meaning and purpose to life and both exceed mere survival.

There are some few things of which we need to be more mindful: that we are called also to be loving—not hateful, proud or contemptuous. We are always to be obeying God and that includes avoiding exploitation and greed. We are to aim at contentment so as to quell envy and reduce both strife and thievery. In faith and trusting God there is huge potential for that contentment. It is not to be confused with apathy, laziness or idleness.

- We are bound to warn others that extinction faces all those who eat their seed. Consider the long term effects of abortion and euthanasia.
- We must tend the earth so as not to cannibalize our future.
- We are to wisely eschew all forms of self-destruction.
- We are to stress that God is broadly pro-life, not pro-death.
- We are to find new and better ways to be productive and to bless others.

Preaching the gospel from the entire word of God gives us insight and wisdom for life. Live fully, expect our reward later. The gospel extends the reach of truth; it draw people in and meets their need for God and others.

**Amen**