

III Living in Caring Consumption

Genesis 9:1-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction: Frame "Opening Image"

Life passes by so quickly that sometimes we need people to help us see. Truly see what is happening around us. Artists can do that. They can pick up their paper and pencil and capture a moment. Sketch it so that we can see it. And seeing it, appreciate it. Consider the drawing by Karl Fay for our sermon this morning. Take a moment to look at the creature that rests in the palm of a hand. It's a mayfly. And mayflies are momentary. They are creatures of the moment. Born in the water, they swim to a rock or a plant. There, they grow wings and fly to another location only to molt again into adults. Once they are adults, they live only a day or two. Their mouths are actually non-functional. They do not need to eat. For they live only briefly. They live. They fly. They mate. They die. In a day or two at the most. And yet, there it is. A mayfly. In the palm of a hand. It wasn't there yesterday. It won't be there tomorrow. But for now, someone holds this creature and is drawn into the momentary wonder of God's creation.

The prism of glass gives off a spectrum of light and a rainbow surrounds the mayfly. I'd like for you to think about that image. A rainbow surrounds a creature in the palm of your hand. Often when we see rainbows the last thing we think about is the momentary mayfly. Our culture has taken the rainbow and used it as a symbol for gay rights. Before that, the rainbow was popularly associated with leprechauns. Remember Lucky Charms? General Mills was playing with the myth of a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Rights. Gold. So much can lie underneath a rainbow. But what happens if we reach back into Scripture and listen to the word of God?

What we will discover is that God has given us the rainbow in order that we might see something else. Not gay rights. Not gold. But life. Created life. Protected by God. Even though we rarely see it, and even though it may last only a day, the mayfly still has value in the sight of God. "Not a sparrow falls," Jesus says. "Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from your Father" (Matthew 10:29). God has placed that which he treasures, his creatures, into our hands and he has given us a rainbow in order that we might see this great gift. In order that we might remember his covenant with all living beings. In the image, the rainbow surrounds the momentary mayfly in the palm of a hand. This reminds us that we care for God's creatures. In our text from Genesis this morning, something similar happens. God reminds us of his covenant with all living creatures, so that we treasure the life God places into our hands.

This morning, we will consider our text from Genesis in order that we might care for God's creatures. Faithfully. Responsibly. My prayer is that we might live in caring consumption as part of God's community of creatures on earth.

Text: Biblical Basis for Caring Consumption

Our text this morning opens with Noah, standing on ground that is still damp with the wrath of God. God has looked from heaven, seen the wickedness deep within the heart of humans, seen how we have fought and killed one another, and sent the flood of his judgment upon all of creation. He flooded the earth and saved Noah, his family, and the animals that Noah gathered onto the ark. Now, God takes Noah back to the memory of Eden. Back to the moment when God first placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and called them to care for creation. "Be fruitful and multiply," God said. "Behold I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food" (Gen. 1:28-29). That's what God said. Now, as Noah stands there at the dawn of a new creation, God recalls that memory. He sends Noah to care for the world. This time, however, God's words are a bit different. This time in addition to giving green plants for food, God gives animals for food. He says, "the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all of the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for

you" (Gen. 9:2-3). There is now a strain in our relationship with the animals of this world. They are afraid of us, and well they should be, because God has given them to us for food.

As we care for God's creatures, we find that they have a God-given fear. I remember seeing my neighbor's daughter once, in the backyard, with a baby rabbit from her family's hutch. It was sitting still in the grass and she was petting it. As I watched her hand, I could see the poor rabbit's heart beating through the fur. The rapid beat . . . of a small heart . . . filled with great fear. My neighbors raised rabbits and, through them, God provided food for their table. That good design produced this moment of tender tension. A little girl. A baby rabbit. Her small hand trying to calm a frightened heart. God gives us fearful creatures and calls us to their care.

God has given us the animal kingdom for food but he also wants us to be aware of something. He wants us to be aware of the wonder of his gift. It would be easy to see the animal kingdom as something we can use indiscriminately for our selfish passions. We could cultivate a taste for shark fin soup and overlook the fact that our culinary desires are causing ecological harm. Sharks are finned and then dropped back into the ocean. Without fins, unable to swim, they sink to the bottom, and die. From 2000 to 2013, we were killing about 100 million sharks a year.^[1] Since sharks mature slowly and have a low reproductive rate, our desire for this delicacy is driving an animal to extinction. The loss of this major predator means more than the loss of shark fin soup on the menu. It will reshape marine communities. Now, I assume that most of you

have not had shark fin soup. But you have eaten chicken. Beef. Pork. When was the last time you considered how those animals were treated? Our text reminds us this morning that all of the animals we eat are brought to life by God and cared for by him. That's the other teaching of this text. God places fear in the hearts of the animals but he also seeks to place love in the hearts of humans.

Notice what God does in this text. After God gives animals to humans for food, he reminds Noah of the divine gift of life. God tells Noah that he "shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood" (Gen. 9:4). God wants us to know that life is sacred. The lives of humans. The lives of animals. All life belongs to God. Those who take a human life will have their life taken. And, although humans can take the lives of animals, they do so recognizing that life is a gift from God.

Not only does God remind Noah of the divine gift of life but then God also makes a covenant with all created life. This is the part of the story we often remember. God placed a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his covenant. God will never again destroy life by the waters of a flood. What is interesting, however, is that God makes this covenant not just with human creatures. God makes this covenant with all living creatures. God says, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, *and with every living creature that is with you*" (Gen. 9:9-10; cf. 9:12 and 15). God's covenant is not just with humans but also with the creatures of this world. God cares for them. When God sees the rainbow in

the clouds, he remembers his "everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (Gen. 9:16).

God has offered us a gift "the gift of animals for food" and yet he calls us to treasure that gift with him. In this way, God weaves together care and consumption. On the one hand, he delivers all animals into our hands and yet, on the other hand, he establishes a covenant with all animals on earth. The life God pictures for Noah, for Abraham, for Isaac and Jacob, for Peter and Paul, for me and you, is a life of caring consumption. We care for the animals that God has given us even as we consume some animals as God's provision of food. Care and consumption are woven together in a life of faithful responsibility.

Application: Living in Caring Consumption as Part of Discipleship

Unfortunately, we have a tendency to tear apart what God has joined together. God has brought us into a life of caring consumption but we can destroy that life. We can make it only about care or only about consumption. But not about both.

Some of you may have been uneasy as I was talking about shark fin soup. It could have sounded like I was bringing a political agenda into the pulpit, like I was becoming a "raving environmentalist." Isn't it sad that we cannot talk about the care of creation without generating that fear? I think that is because there are so few Christian voices talking about the care of creation. When we hear a Christian talk about it, other voices ring in our ears and drown out what is said. For example, as I talked about shark fin soup, you

may have overheard those who overemphasize care to the point where they deny consumption. Melanie Joy, a social psychologist, animal activist and educator, writes about what she calls carnism.[2] The belief systems, of which Christianity is one, that cause us to think it's okay to eat meat. The goal of her book is to move people from carnism to compassion and care for all species. Yet, in this case, she overemphasizes care to the point where God's gift of consumption is seriously called into question.

When care is overemphasized to the point where the word of God is denied, when that is *all* you hear, unfortunately, some Christians tend to shift all the way over to the other side of the spectrum. They end up overemphasizing consumption to the point where they forget about care. We hear about chickens at industrialized farms, [3] genetically manipulated to grow larger and faster so that they can be slaughtered as early as six or seven weeks. Their flesh grows faster than their skeletons or internal organs, which break down under the stress. Their beaks are removed to prevent the fighting that results from their living conditions. We hear these reports but we don't listen. Because the battle lines are drawn. It is either care or consumption and, after all, a person has got to eat. Rather than work together to see how we might faithfully and responsibly live in caring consumption, we join the fray. We argue for care. We argue for consumption. Or we simply ignore it all and separate our faith from daily life in God's creation.

Yet God has placed us in the midst of creation. And he has called us to live here faithfully and responsibly sharing life with all other creatures in the world God has made. God values all of life.

So much so that he not only sends a rainbow to remind us of his care but he sends his Son so that we may live in his care. When we lose sight of God's good design, God does not lose sight of us. He sees us in our sin. Separated from the world - as we consume but don't care. Separated from one another " " as we fight about care and consumption. Separated from God " " as we act as if faith does not have any relationship with how we live in the world. God sees us torn and separated. Lost in our self-destruction and he sends Jesus to bring about peace. Wholeness. A restored relationship between God and humans and a restored relationship between human creatures and all creation. Jesus Christ took on our human flesh. Borrowing our blood, he became the perfect sacrifice for sin. He took his life and offered it up to God that we might be forgiven. That our lives might be cared for by God and that our torn relationships with him, with one another, and with the world might be made whole once again.

What a blessing, today, for us to gather around God's word. For us to hear God call us away from dividing the world into care or consumption and call us back to a life of caring consumption in him. Caring consumption is how we rejoice in the gift of life from God.

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, as they wandered through the desert wilderness, God offered them laws to guide their life in the Promised Land. That land would be flowing with milk and honey. That land would offer an abundance of life. Yet, even in the midst of abundance, God desired his people to live in caring consumption. He told them that when they gleaned the fields, they were not to

glean right up to the edge but to leave something for the poor and the sojourner (Lev. 19:9-10). When an ox was treading out grain, they were not to muzzle it (Deut. 25:4). It too should benefit from the labor of generating food. Life wasn't just about consumption. It also involved care for the community. Both humans and animals. God also gave them directions for how they consumed animals. He told them that they were not to boil a goat in its mother's milk (Ex. 34:26) and that, if they came across a bird's nest with a mother and her young in it, they could not take the young away with the mother (Deut. 22:6). The animal kingdom was not just about resources. It also involved care for relationships. Life is not just consumption but community. The world is not just resources but relationships. God desired Israel to live in caring consumption, valuing community, valuing relationships with all creatures, as they entered the Promised Land.

For you, too, today. Life is about more than your clothes or the food that you eat. It is about community, not just commodities. Relationships, not just resources. The goodness of creation, not just the goods. Think about Jesus, appearing to his disciples, after Easter. What is interesting is that Jesus comes in his human body. Notice how Jesus did not use our human body as a resource, as a commodity. He did not take on human flesh, use it to bring about forgiveness, and then toss it away. Rather, he entered into community with us. He died for us and, when he rose from the dead, he rose with his body, that he might live in relationship with us in

a new creation. There we shall live in human flesh, in glorified bodies, forever creatures of God. Until that day, we live now in a relationship of caring consumption with all of creation.

When Jesus appeared to his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he found them fishing. As they come to the shore, he gathers them around a fire for breakfast. After his resurrection, Jesus doesn't only come to his disciples at the meal of the Lord's Supper. He also comes to them in a common meal. Fish. Cooked over coals. For breakfast. What scholars have always found interesting about this text is the fact that the disciples caught 153 fish.

John gives us the precise number. 153. Scholars have debated over the meaning of that number. Some say that it represents the number of known species of fish in the world. Others that it represents the number of known nations in the world. What I find interesting, however, is not the meaning of the number but the meaning of the fact that they counted the fish at all. Perhaps they counted the fish, not because the number itself was important but because the fish were. Each fish, a gift from God. To be counted. Valued. Appreciated as a gift. Like the time when they gathered leftover baskets of bread after Jesus fed thousands . . . like the time when Jesus pointed out the lilies of the field and the birds of the air . . . suddenly, they see. They are creatures in an abundant creation and all of life is a gift, a surprising gift from God. Life in the world involves caring consumption. Whether it is a breakfast of fresh fish over coals or a casserole of chicken from the oven, when you eat, you eat with Jesus. And what you eat, you take note of. You count. As a gift.

Conclusion: Frame "" Closing Image

In a way, this text from Genesis is a prism that shines God's light upon our world. Yes, God has given us food for our table but it is always part of a larger picture. A life of caring consumption. We see the food that we eat *and* the world that produced it. We see the waste that we make *and* the world that receives it. We are part of God's world. Giving. Receiving. Caring. Consuming. A community of creatures who live in relationship to one another. Surrounded by a promise. A rainbow, if you will. The eternal covenant of a loving God. Amen.

[1] Worm, Boris, et al., "Global Catches, Exploitation Rates, and Rebuilding Options for Sharks" in *Marine Policy* 40 (July 2013): 194-204.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X13000055>
(<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X13000055>).

Accessed August 12, 2013.

[2] Melanie Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows* (San Francisco: Carnari Press, 2010). Joy's work is a popular positioning of earlier arguments against speciesism. See Gary Francione, *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or Your Dog?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000). Ultimately, while

Joy advocates the ideal of eliminating consumption of animal products, she recognizes that "just reducing the amount of them in your diet can have a significant impact on the animals and on yourself" (147). This "reductionist" position and her promotion of vegetarianism (rather than veganism) have evoked sharp criticism of her work as only partially addressing the problems of speciesism. I chose Joy because her work is a popular piece and she is currently on a national speaking tour. Other works that could be used as an example at this point in the sermon are mentioned in the sermon notes.

[3] <http://advocacy.britannica.com/blog/advocacy/2007/05/the-difficult-lives-and-deaths-of-factory-farmed-chickens/>
(<http://advocacy.britannica.com/blog/advocacy/2007/05/the-difficult-lives-and-deaths-of-factory-farmed-chickens/>). Accessed August 12, 2013.

Copyright © 2013 David Schmitt. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2014 [The Center for the Care of Creation \(about-ccc/\)](http://www.about-ccc.org/) at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis