

God Sees the Sparrow

A sermon preached at
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Text: Numbers 22:22-35, Luke 13:10-17

I was outside in the backyard with my two kids, who were aged five and three. I saw a very interesting beetle on our patio. I had never seen anything like it. I called my daughter Katie over, "Katie, come and see what I've found!" She bent down almost double and looked at it very carefully, "It is so cute! Let's keep it, let's make a home for it!" And she ran inside to find a container. This was one of those, "Isn't God's creation beautiful moments." While she was in the house, I called over to Alex who was playing in the sandbox, and said in exactly the same way, "Alex, come and see what I've found." I watched him as he bent over double and looked carefully at the bug. And then quick as lightning, he stood up and smashed his foot down on the bug, grinding it to bits.

These were both my children, I had raised them and they had entirely different approaches to one of God's creatures. This morning I want to talk about how we relate to the other creatures God created on this earth. Do we appreciate and admire them, or do we smash them to bits? Do Christians, does the church, have anything to say when people are cruel to animals?

I've chosen a very unique passage of scripture for my sermon today. It sounds more like a fairy tale or a fable than a story from the Bible. It is about Balaam, a man who lived in Moab. He, and many people around him, believed that he had the power to bless and to curse. The Israelites were moving into their neighbourhood, and they weren't happy about it. So they decided to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. But God decides to intervene, and the way he intervenes in this section of the story, is by sending an angel to stop Balaam. Balaam is saved from certain death by the hero of the story: a donkey! This is one of the few stories of the bible where the animal is a central character!

It is a story about God sending a message to a prophet. And it's a story about cruelty to animals. The donkey turns aside into a field. Balaam strikes the donkey. The donkey rubs Balaam's foot against the wall, Balaam strikes the donkey again. The donkey lays down under him, and Balaam takes his staff and starts beating the donkey. The donkey has done all these things as a means of avoiding the angel of death that is awaiting Balaam. Balaam doesn't see the angel. All he sees is his stupid donkey doing stupid things, and so he beats the poor animal.

And then something amazing happens. A miracle. The donkey is given the power of speech, and he asks Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you've hit me these three times?"

Balaam is just so mad at the donkey that he doesn't even seem to notice the oddness of a donkey speaking. He responds to it with the words, "Because you made a fool of me. If I had a sword in my hand I would kill you right now!" Balaam is angry enough to kill this donkey.

But the donkey rebukes him, and reminds him of their history together. “Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?”

In other words, the donkey is saying, “You know me, why don’t you trust me? Why don’t you give me some credit?” The human/animal relationship in this story is surprisingly complex, it’s about long-term relationships and expectations.

And it is at that moment that Balaam has an epiphany. He suddenly sees the angel for himself, and he realizes that his donkey has saved his life. The story goes on to talk more about the Moabites and what Balaam actually does or does not do. But the part of the story that I am interested in today, is this story of the donkey.

What if God made a miracle, and your dog could talk. Would it say to you, “Why are you kicking me?” Or if the beetle could talk, would it say, “What have I done to you, that you are squishing me with your foot?” Would we be kinder to animals if they could talk to us? Now the quick answer to that might be “Yes, we would be kinder.” But I’m not so sure that is true. People can talk, and yet that has never stopped us from being cruel to each other.

The creation stories at the beginning of Genesis show God creating every living thing that moves, and God saw that it was good. Affirming God’s good creation, I think, at a bare minimum, should mean not treating other creatures with cruelty. That’s why when my son squished the beetle with his foot, I explained to him that this beetle was hurting no one, bothering no one, and that it would be better, it would be kinder, to leave it alone. Like the famous line from the book, “To Kill a Mockingbird” by Harper Lee. In the book, one of the kids has been trying to shoot a mockingbird. The main character Atticus Finch says, “It’s a sin to kill a mockingbird... [they] don’t do anything but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat people’s gardens, don’t nest in the corncrib, they don’t do one thing but just sing their hearts out for us.”

I have two quotes in the bulletin today, one by an early church father, Basil the Great, and the other by a Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky; writing 1500 years apart, they have the same message. There is a joy in living things; we are called to love the other living creatures God has made. God sees the sparrow, God sees that it is good. Can we see the world with God’s eyes?

Most major religions have something to say about human beings’ relationship to animals. Next to our relationship with the divine, and other human beings, our relationship with animals is the most central relationship we have. Hindus believe that you should “do no harm”. It’s the principle of ahimsa. You should live your life trying not to harm any living creature. This leads some people to choose a vegetarian lifestyle, and I have heard that some particularly devout people try not to kill anything, even bugs.

Native American peoples respected the life force within other creatures. While they would use animals for food and other purposes, they did not kill them indiscriminately. Which is why they were so appalled at the arrival of white people, who would just shoot buffalos out of a train for sport, leaving them to die in pain and then rot; not even using their bodies for food or clothing.

The Jewish religion obviously allowed animals to be killed, for sacrifices and for food, but they valued animals. As a herding society, animals were their wealth. They took care of their animals carefully. While not a big part of the laws, there are important references to animals that seek to avoid cruelty. For example in Deuteronomy 25:4, God instructs the people of Israel: "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." In other words, the animal that is working for you deserves its share of its labour, however much it wants. Or in Deuteronomy 22:10, "You shall not plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together." One animal is obviously stronger than the other, and it is unfair and cruel to expect the weaker animal to pull that much weight. In the Psalms God is even pictured as a shepherd, as someone who cares for animals and love them. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

There are a few significant references to animals; but are they enough that Christians should care about cruelty to animals? And some of you may even be wondering, "Carol, why in the world are you preaching about this, this just isn't an issue in our society. I don't see people being cruel to animals! I would never be cruel to animals." And perhaps you haven't seen anyone acting like Balaam, beating an animal to death. Have you ever wondered why that is? Why is that not a common sight in our society?

The reason it's not common is because we have laws against it! If you walk out of church today and see a dog you don't like, and beat it to death with a shovel, you could go to jail. Where did those laws come from? They started in England in the early 1800's. England, like other countries at that time, ran on horsepower. Horses were the primary means of transportation, you rode them or they pulled carriages. They moved merchandise, they powered the barges that moved the products of industry. Horses worked in the mines, pulling the minerals out of the earth. We still talk about horsepower, and that's because it was horses that powered that society. The workhorses of that society were literally horses, which is why we have that expression!

Well in England of the 1800's many horses were mistreated. Carriage horses would be worked literally to death. They would fall in their traces. Or people would beat a horse to death on the street if they were angry with it, just like Balaam wanted to. Or people, for the sake of fashion, would rein their horses with very tight reins, called a check rein, so that they would hold their heads up super-high...and this caused the horse a lot of pain. In the 1800's a lot of animals were suffering in plain view.

There were people who were very disturbed by this, and a group of 22 concerned citizens gathered together in June 1824 to form a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or the SPCA. 21 of the 22 founding members were Christians. The minute book of that organization records in its first meeting; "The proceedings of this society are entirely based on the Christian faith and on Christian principles."

One of the founding members of this society was an Anglican minister named Arthur Broome. He left his salaried ministry in the church in order to work full-time as an unpaid volunteer for the SPCA; that's how much he believed in this cause. The organization employed a number of people to lay charges against people who were being cruel to animals. A few laws had recently been put on the books about cruelty to animals, but no one was bothering to enforce them. Since cruelty to animals was so pervasive, people didn't even bother with it, they didn't take the laws and certainly not the SPCA seriously. But the SPCA tried to prosecute anyone who was cruel to horses, who ran dog pits (where dogs fought to the death for the enjoyment of spectators), or those who operated slaughterhouses that were inhumane.

Arthur Broome used all his own money to fund the work of the society, but that eventually ran out, and since the society racked up a lot of debts hiring lawyers to prosecute people, Broome was held personally responsible. He was imprisoned for these debts (that's what they used to do if you couldn't pay your debts). One historian rather obviously commented that being thrown in prison was "a most unfortunate position for a clergyman," and he died a poor man because of his devotion to this cause of protecting animals.

Three years after Broome's death, the SPCA came to be supported by the Duchess of Kent and her daughter, who were both animal lovers. The Duchess of Kent's daughter, whose name was Victoria, soon became Queen Victoria of Great Britain. Victoria really loved dogs (in case you were wondering, she had collies, not corgis). She patronized the society and it became "The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals". It started to become an organization that had teeth; it started to change the way animals were being treated in Britain.

Another English Christian who was an important player in preventing cruelty to animals was Anna Sewell. Anna was a Quaker, whose family believed that people and all God's creatures should be treated with compassion. She particularly loved horses. As a young girl, when she and her mother were out riding, if they saw a horse being mistreated, they would stop and try to get the owner to stop beating it.

When Anna Sewell was an adult, she wrote a book called *Black Beauty*. It was published in 1877. How many people here have read this book? It's a story of a horse, but it's told from the horse's perspective. The horse has various owners who treat it kindly, or treat it with cruelty. I remember reading this book as a young girl and having tears running down my face: "Why would anyone want to hurt Black Beauty?" Having the horse be a speaking character in the book is particularly effective. I think it's highly likely that Anna was inspired by our scripture text today, and the donkey's plaintive voice, "What have I done to you, that you are beating me?"

Anna Sewell's book became very, very popular; it has never been out of print and has sold 50 million copies. The book popularized the idea of kindness to animals, and it helped to raise generation after generation of young people who had compassion for animals. Anna's faith in God was her motivating force. She talks about compassion towards animals as something that is God-given and innate in us. We are called and equipped to be kind to animals.

The story we read today from the gospel of Luke tells us about the healing of the bent over woman. Jesus is amazed at the hardness of heart of the Pharisees, and he searches for a way to reach them, to give them insight. He knows that the Pharisees took good care of their animals. So he starts there. He says, "You would take care of your animals, whether or not it was a Sabbath...you wouldn't let a law about the Sabbath stop you from being kind to them." And then the kicker, "If you are kind to animals on the Sabbath, shouldn't you be kind to this suffering woman on Sabbath?" Jesus uses our relationship with animals as a way of converting us to think about people differently.

The method Jesus uses in that gospel story has been played out again and again in different ways through history. Let me give you one example. In 1873, in a very poor neighbourhood of New York City called Hell's Kitchen, a Methodist missionary named Etta Wheeler, visited a dying woman. The dying woman said that she had one last request. There was a child in the apartment next door who was being left all day alone without food, and when the mother came home at night, she would beat the child, and her shrieks were horrible. She asked the missionary whether she could do something to help that girl: that was her dying wish.

Etta Wheeler took this request seriously; she investigated, and saw the child whose name was Mary Ellen Wilson. She saw that her body was covered with welts. Etta went to the police, but they told her that they could not interfere between a parent and a child. Then she went to various charities, who said they could provide food and clothing, but they had no power to take a child from its mother. There were no laws in America that could protect a child from being beaten by its parents. What Etta Wheeler did next was to hire a lawyer, the very lawyer who had in fact started the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. She told the lawyer that she wanted to prosecute a woman who was being cruel to a little animal. It was only after the lawyer agreed to take the case that she told him that the little animal was a girl named Mary Ellen.

The lawyer decided to take the case. They charged the mother with cruelty to animals. While there were no laws preventing people from beating children, there were laws preventing cruelty to animals. The SPCA had worked to get those laws on the books.

The lawyer told judge and jury that the child was an animal and was being mistreated. The turning point in this case came when the lawyer brought the little Mary Ellen into the court room; she was dressed in rags and covered in huge welts and bruises, she had a giant gash on her face where she had been hit with scissors. You can see a picture of Mary Ellen Wilson on the internet. Reporters in the courtroom that day wrote that grown men started crying when they saw her. They said, "We wouldn't allow a dog to be treated this way, how can we let this happen to a little girl?"

The judge and jury found the mother guilty of cruelty to animals. Mary Ellen was taken from the home and her mother was put in jail for a year. This high profile case led to so many cases coming forward of cruelty to children, that a new organization was formed: the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. It was the first child protection agency in the world. They campaigned for laws to protect children from cruelty.

Now I personally found this story extremely surprising. In my mind it makes sense that we would first have laws that protect children, and then eventually, years later, we would extend that care and compassion from human beings to animals. In fact, history teaches us that it was exactly the opposite. Our care and concern and kindness for animals, taught us what it meant to be compassionate towards human beings. That's the principle that Jesus used with the Pharisees. I think there is a deep spiritual symbiosis or kinship between human beings and other living creatures.

Some of you have felt that. Many of you have had significant relationships with certain animals. Statistically 57% of Canadians have a pet. People go to the expense and trouble of owning a pet because pets provide companionship and joy, they nurture our spirituality. We heard about Hope, a therapy dog, in our children's story today, but in many ways, all pets are therapy creatures, because they share their joy with us. We are thankful to God for these life-giving relationships. We privilege certain individual animals as pets, but that is only part of the story. God cares about all of creation.

Today I've told a few stories about how certain Christians have followed their conscience and worked for the humane treatment of animals. However the church as a whole has not been a participant in the movement for the protection of animals. In fact the Christian religion is often blamed for the abuse of animals, because Christians have historically believed that God gave us dominion over animals. And we have too often defined dominion as "You are there for our benefit, we can do whatever we want with you."

Churches have felt that they have enough on their plate working to be compassionate to human beings, they can't add concern for animals too. We leave that to the secular world. Aren't human beings way more important than animals anyway? The gospel is good news for people, isn't it?

I think scripture encourages us to think holistically about our world. God made the animals and God made us. We are in the same garden. We may appreciate our pets, but God made all the animals and birds and fish and bugs; God sees even the sparrow. The vision of the future we are given in scripture is of a time when the lion and the lamb lay down together, and a little child will lead them.

The story of Balaam and his donkey gets me thinking. I wonder, if God gave the miracle of speech to animals today, what would they say to us?

A small rabbit in a cage in a research facility might ask, "Why are you putting lipstick in my eyes?" A salmon might ask, "Why is there mercury, why are there microbeads in the rivers that are my home?" The passenger pigeon might ask: [silence] The passenger pigeon can't say anything because it is extinct, even though it was once the most numerous bird on our planet. Human beings hunted it to extinction. If God cares about the sparrow, God certainly cares that there are no more passenger pigeons. We can hear God's voice plainly in the silence.

While in our society we would never want to see a single animal beaten to death, and we have laws against that, the endangerment and extinction of species in our country due to overfishing, hunting, pollution and urban expansion is a slow-motion cruelty that has a more catastrophic effect on our environment than the cruel death of any one animal. I wonder whether these animals are speaking to us now in their silence, warning us of our own death.

This week, I encourage you to open your eyes and ears. You will see numerous creatures this week. How many different types of bugs/birds/animals/fish do you think you will see? Eight? Twenty? Take these quotations home and put them on your fridge this week. Every time you see an animal make a note of it, write it on this piece of paper. Let's compare how many creatures we interact with. Not numbers, but types of bugs/birds/animals/fish. This will be good for kids and adults to do. And here is the final part of the assignment. If God gave that creature the miracle of speech, what do you think it might say to you?

The Mennonite Brethren conference is encouraging us to take the gospel to heart and spread that gospel in Canada from sea to sea. If the gospel contains good news for all God's creatures, I wonder what that work of spreading the good news should really look like. Let's pray:

O God, enlarge within us
the sense of fellowship with all living things,
our brothers the animals
to whom you gave the earth as their home
in common with us.
We remember with shame that in the past
we have exercised the high dominion of humans
with ruthless cruelty
so that the voice of the earth,
which should have gone up to you in song,
has been a groan of travail.
May we realize that they live not for us alone
but for themselves and for you,
and that they love the sweetness of life.
~St. Basil the Great (330-379)

Love all God's creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light! Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. And once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly, more and more every day. And you will at last come to love the whole world with an abiding, universal love.

Love the animals: God gave them the rudiments of thought and untroubled joy. Do not, therefore, trouble it, do not torture them, do not deprive them of their joy, do not go against God's intent.

~Fyodor Dostoevsky, Chapter 41, The Brothers Karamazov, 1880.