

“Our Furry/Feathered Friends”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
September 29, 2019**

New Testament Lesson: Luke 15:3-6

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 2:7-8, 18-20a

Many of you know that some years back my wife, Yuri, and I adopted a little corgi named Lacey. She was about 4 years old. When Lacey first arrived in our home, she learned one command: “Hold it.”

It must have been my first time walking her and she spotted a squirrel across the street. Squirrels for Lacey are like donuts for me – one look and I make break for it. Of course, I can’t have my dog dashing into the street (just like I can’t let myself dash for the donuts). So when Lacey turned to run into the street, I gave a good strong tug on her leash and sternly said “Hold it!” And she stopped. Not only did she stop that day, but from that moment on, whenever I say “Hold it,” she stops. And I mean dead in her tracks, like a statue. She’ll stay there until I say, “OK, let’s go.”

Humans and animals have always had a special relationship, all the way back to the beginning. In the Bible, there are 192 different animals mentioned, give or take. That’s 192 different animals not including humans. We are not on Google’s list of animals in the Bible, though clearly we are closer to being animals than a plant or a rock. And scientifically, we are classified as mammals, and thus, we are a type of animal. A very special type of animal.

Today we are going to look at what makes us so special. And we’re going to do that by looking – not at ourselves – but at our furry/feathered friends. That is, the animals of the earth.

In our reading from Genesis today we learn that God created, as our helpers, “every animal of the field and every bird of the air.” So, how do animals help us? That’s what we’re exploring today – the importance of animals in our lives, and particularly in our relationship with God and with one another.

Before God created all the animals of the world, God created us. And he didn’t just create us. He breathed the breath of life into us. It’s at that moment, says Genesis, that we “became ... living being(s).”

But wait a minute. God also created all the animals and they are living beings, or at least living things. But I like calling them “living beings.” Lacey is not a thing, she’s a living being, a sweet creature of God.

And yet, Genesis makes a distinction between human beings and all other creatures. God did not breathe “the breath of life” into all animals, just us. Genesis says that God created all animals “out of the ground,” which is just the way he formed humankind, “from the dust of the ground,” says Genesis.

So, animals and humankind are made of the same stuff. And yet, there is profound difference between us and animals. And that difference is the breath of God, breathed into us at our inception.

The primary difference between us and animals is God. We have God’s breath – God’s Spirit – within us. And as much as we love our pets, they are different. God is in them – God is in all creation – but not in the same way that God is in us.

That said, it should be noted that we are more like animals than we are like God. God is so vast, so powerful, so omniscient – or all knowing, that we can’t even approach God. Furthermore, God made us and God made animals and God made all creation. So clearly, we are not like God – equal to God – nor should we seek to be equal with God.

And yet, that’s just what we did in the Garden of Eden, right? God told us not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and we did it anyway.

By the way, in ancient Hebrew, opposites like “good” and “evil” were used to refer to everything in between. So rather than thinking of us wanting to know both good and evil, think of it as us wanting to know everything. That makes the story of the Adam and Eve and the apple a little more clear, doesn’t it? We wanted to know everything God knows, and thus, be equal with God.

And yet, we are not to know everything, not in the way that God does. That’s just not our lot in life, not how God created us. Why, not? God only knows, and we should be happy with that, happy that we don’t and can’t know everything. And we should be happy and grateful that we can know something, lots of things. What we get to know is what God has revealed to us and placed within our grasp to discover.

I always say that if any one political party, any one nation, any one denomination got to have all the power and all the knowledge and make all the rules, we’d mess things up real bad. And we do.

Whenever we use our power and knowledge to elevate ourselves at the expense of others – with a disregard for the whole of God’s creation – we suffer, others suffer, creation suffers. There is a hierarchy in this world, and in that hierarchy there is God, there are human beings, there are animals, and there is all the rest of creation. We are all bound together in relationship with one another, God, humankind, animals and all of creation. Destroy one and we destroy it all, except for God, of course.

Sadly, human beings are closer nowadays to having the power – and the misguided, evil intention – to destroy vast parts of creation, with no regard for the beauty and balance of things as God created them.

So, what’s the answer? What’s the answer when it comes to restoring the sacred balance of creation, restoring a mutual care and concern by and for humanity? The answer is Lacey. My dog is the answer. Well, actually not my dog, but rather how my dog and I get along.

Lacey depends on Yuri and me for the food she eats, the warmth she feels, the freedom she enjoys, and the care and protection she receives. Lacey depends on us in much the same way that we all depend on God.

Genesis says that God created the animals of the earth to be our helpers. Well, here – surprise – we are actually seeing that animals can help us relate better to God and to one another.

If we listened to and obeyed God the way Lacey listens to and obeys me – when I say “Hold it!” – we and all the world would be so much better off. Thoughtlessly heading for that box of donuts, Dave? “Hold it,” says God. “Compulsive eating is not good for you, it’s not the way I made you, and it’s not why I created food in the first place. Use food,” says God, “as I intended it – for nutrition, fellowship, to bless the lives of others.”

Same with sexuality, political and physical power, the words we say, the treasures we share – or hoard. God says, “Do not use your sexuality, your power, your words, your wealth to hurt others. Rather, use God’s good gifts to build others up, to protect them, to bring them true joy, to give them life.”

The next time you catch yourself using God’s good gifts apart from their intended purpose, stop and listen. Listen for God. There is no doubt that if you listen with ears and heart attuned to God’s will and God’s word, you’ll hear him say to you, “Hold it. Don’t misuse that good gift of creation I gave to you,” says God.

And once you've heard God say, "Hold it," that's when you – that's when we – need to remember the hierarchy of creation, that's when we need to be more like Lacey than like Adam or Eve. That's when we need to obey.

God's greatest desire for you and your life is love, joy, peace and hope. All of creation is centered upon God's love for us and for the world. As we develop the presence of mind and the will of spirit to do things God's way, we will begin to hear God speak another, more enthusiastic command to us.

It's the same command Lacey hears after the "Hold it," after being a good girl, after stopping and waiting. When the danger has past, Lacey hears me says, "OK, let's go," and off we go full of love and joy and peace and hope. That's God's desire for us all. A little, "Hold it" when needed. And lots of, "OK, let's go." Amen. OK. Let's go.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of glory, we praise you for your presence in our lives, and for all goodness that you shower upon us in Jesus Christ.

Especially we praise and thank you for promises kept and hope for tomorrow, the enjoyment of friends, the joy of families, the wonders of your creation, those who have gone before us, love from our parents, sisters and brothers, love from our spouse and children, our faith and the church.

Remind us, O Lord, that we are all your children, for we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

We offer our prayers for those whom you love.

We ask your strength and healing touch upon these dear people and upon all those we keep in prayer.

Hear us now, O God, as we pray as Jesus taught us saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**