

Sermon preached by Deacon Christopher Cox at Sts Stephen and Barnabas, Florence, NJ.  
2nd Sunday after Epiphany. January 15, 2017

“Not one of them is forgotten before God”

Good morning. It's a great pleasure and honor to be at Sts. Stephen and Barnabas today at the invitation of Mother Linda, and as the warm-up act for the Animal Welfare Forum that will take place right after the service. My name is Chris Cox. I normally hang out at Trinity Cathedral, where I serve as a vocational deacon. Among other things, I would describe myself as a “keen animal welfare advocate”; others might call me an “animal nut”. And with your indulgence, during our sermon time this morning I want to reflect on how God speaks to us, how God provides spiritual nourishment and opportunities for new life and Kingdom building, how God makes us more human, - how God achieves all of these things, not only in and through our relationships with each other, as important as that is, but also in our physical and spiritual connection with all of God's creation, especially God's living, thinking, loving, creatures that we are privileged to share this planet with.

Let me start at home. My wife and I have a large tabby cat called Reuben. In case you're a bit rusty on the Patriarchs and the tribes of Israel, Reuben was the name of the first born child of Jacob and Leah. He was the sensible eldest brother of the 12 sons (and daughter Dinah), and it was Reuben who talked his younger brothers and half-brothers out of killing Joseph, and devised the plan of putting Joseph in a pit for safe keeping, so he could sneak him back to his father, Jacob, at a later time. We all know how that turned out, but Reuben never bought into the plan of selling Joseph into slavery, but was only ever concerned about his safety.

It's all the more ironic, then, that my Reuben, when he was barely weened, was put in a black bin liner along with his siblings, and thrown in a trash can, - a metaphorical pit, and left to die. Some kindhearted passerby heard the kittens crying from inside the trash, and they eventually found their way to an animal shelter, where we adopted Reuben. That was 16 years ago.

Our other tabby cat, who we call Piglet, originally belonged to my daughter's college roommate. As soon as she left for college, her parents put Piglet in a shelter, where she was in danger of being euthanized. My wife and I stepped in. Our third cat, Holly, was returned to the shelter at a young age for “not being a people cat”. She was also on death row when we adopted her.

You can see a pattern developing here! These beloved companion animals that became a source of great joy, comfort and love to my family these passed 15 plus years, were all originally considered rejects and cast offs, left to die. Why did that happen? Because somewhere along the way, in some persons' hearts, the physical and spiritual connection with God's creation had been broken, forgotten, deemed to be of no importance, - resulting in a disregard for life. Unfortunately, that disconnection with God's creatures still happens all too often today, and not just with our companion animals or pets, but on a massive and unimaginable scale in our factory farms and research laboratories, to mention just two places of concern.

But now some good news. We worship a God who has a special concern for the “least of these”, - the outcast, the rejected, the abused and exploited, - even animals: In the Gospel of Luke we hear Jesus saying “Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten

before God". It is my belief that God's love for us is manifested in all of creation, especially as God's creatures minister to us emotionally, make us whole, and strengthen our relationship with the Creator. And I believe that God's vision for humanity's relationship with animals is very different from the reality we see today.

Starting at the beginning, the first creation story in Genesis is one of a vegetarian society. Speaking to the man and woman in Gen 1:29, God said "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food". I find this interesting, not because I believe in the literal creation story, (I don't), but because the authors of Genesis believed this to be God's will for all creation, and thought it important enough to include in the scriptures. And later, writing to the exiles, Isaiah provided a vision of God's restored Kingdom on earth: From Isaiah 11:6, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

I believe that God has a purpose and direction for humanity, a movement towards a Peaceable Kingdom. **Restoring humanity's relationship with Creation is part of that work.** In my most optimistic, and perhaps Spirit-filled moments, I sense we are on the cusp of a "sea change" in our culture, a tipping point in our attitude towards animals. I believe there is an opportunity within my lifetime to "move the needle", - or in theological terms, it might seem more like moving mountains! But of course, as we heard in the First letter to the Corinthians this morning, it's never about our abilities or what we can do, it's always about God working in and through us. And with God all things are possible, even moving mountains.

So it was about 18 months ago, when all these thoughts and ideas that were swirling inside me, finally boiled over. With a lot of encouragement from my Spiritual Director, I talked to Bishop Stokes. The conversation went something like this: "Bishop, I've re-read the Catechism, and the Mission Statement of the Episcopal Church, and the Baptismal Covenant, and my Ordination vows, - and nowhere do I see a clear statement connecting animal welfare to the mission and ministry of the Church. AND YET, I feel as strongly as any calling I have ever had, that God is asking for a new animal welfare ministry right here and now in this diocese. To some it may not make sense when there are so many other (human) needs in the world, but I cannot deny or turn my back on this call."

The Bishop said two things. Firstly, - "OK, go with it, - and Susan will probably be the first one to sign up to help". And secondly, he said, very wisely, "go find out what the rest of the National Church is doing about animal concerns". So I discovered there was a bunch of General Convention Resolutions over the last 12 years that gave us a base to work from. Within a few weeks I sent an email to the whole diocese and got an immediate response from about 30 people, including our own Mother Linda, who today form the Animal Welfare Team. Part of our work is to travel to different parishes and present our one-hour forum, which offers some very practical, and relatively easy and gentle ways we can all help move the mountain. Sharon Patterson, our presenter today, is a professional educator and has put together an outstanding presentation. You will be glad you stayed.

Earlier this week, Karla Droste, my spiritual director and member of the Animal Welfare Team, sent me a meditation from the “DailyWord”. With reference to animals it said “caring for the living creations of God is a sacred responsibility.” I would like to end on that thought. This work we do in God’s name is a sacred duty. I think we all know the deep truth that a reflection of the Holy is seen in all of creation. And unlikely prophets and servants of God as we all are, we are called now to act and speak out for the defenseless, exploited, and tortured creatures of God. In doing so we are showing God’s love to the world.

May God help us in all that we do in God’s Name.

Amen.