

Fred Myers

It's not every Sunday that we get to share worship with our extended loved ones — our pets — and for them to receive a blessing for their importance in our lives. My family didn't get to bring our pets today because we didn't know how to transport a ten-gallon fish tank. So, our ten fish are represented with a picture and in our hearts.

Animals play an important part in our society not only as pets but as fellow citizens. Seeing Eye dogs and dogs for the deaf help folks with these disabilities live independent lives. Pigeons carry messages during wartime; the fish at our house teach responsibility.

We see them in films where animals perform death-defying acts of courage, perseverance or some other human characteristic. A few that come to mind are *Finding Nemo*, *Homeward Bound*, and the most recent film, *Space Chimps*.

We also use animals to describe ourselves and our world. For instance, "it's raining cats and dogs" — what in the world does that mean? What about "I'm hungry as a horse" —

everybody's been there. Or "sly as a fox" — Jesus uses this analogy to describe Herod in the Bible. God is compared to an ox, a lion, and an eagle.

Speaking of the Bible, there are animals all over the place in the scriptures. I have to admit, though, it was difficult to find a scripture for today that concerned animals that didn't end in a bloody sacrifice. The good news is, I did find beautiful passages about God's creatures where they were considered very valuable for other things as well. Oxen were used to move the grinding stone to press olive oil and wine as well as grind grains. Donkeys and camels were used to transport stuff or to ride during a long journey. Owning these work animals was a sign of wealth and success.

God calls animals to God's service too. For example, the story of Jonah? God called the "big fish," or whale, as we call it, to swallow Jonah. What about the worm later in the same story that killed the bush that Jonah sat under? Yes, God really did call a worm to do God's work. Remember the Palm Sunday story about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey? That particular

ride was prophesied by the prophet Zechariah: “your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey.”

I found two remarkable animals speaking the language of humans. The first one is at the very beginning: the serpent in the garden. The serpent is described in Genesis 3 as more crafty than the other creatures that God created. We remember that Adam and Eve are conned by the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit, which leads to their dismissal from the Garden.

The second talking beast is a donkey. The donkey spoke to the foreign priest, Balaam, when he was on the way to curse Israel. Balaam had struck the donkey three times for not staying on the path. The donkey strayed because the angel of the Lord blocked the path with a sword drawn. Balaam couldn't see the angel but the donkey could. So, after saving Balaam three times the donkey asked, “What have I done to you to deserve being struck three times?” That's when Balaam could see the angel and realized his donkey had saved his life.

All this is interesting trivia about animals in the Bible; however, our topic today is about how we should treat animals — how we care for creation.

Our scripture reading is the portion of the creation story where the animals are created. We've started the story in the middle. Let me catch you up. During the previous four days God created light and dark, sky and earth, day and night, sea and land, the sun, the moon and the stars. Then on the fifth day, God creates the sea creatures and birds. On the sixth day, God creates all the land animals and humans. And God says it is all very good.

I want to focus on God's commission to humans to have dominion over the animals. God says, "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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Humans have dominion over the creatures. What is this dominion?

Dominion over something is control or the exercise of control; sovereignty, rule, authority and even government. It

does not mean that we can do whatever we want. For example, a CEO of a company is given the authority to run the company to achieve a certain objective, usually to make money. That does not give the CEO the right to mistreat the employees or the company's money. Even though the CEO has dominion over the company, abuse of the resources would not meet the objective of the CEO's authority. In the same way, dominion over creation does not give humans the right to destroy creation or misuse any part of it. Dominion over creation is about being the caretaker, the protector of what God created. Like the CEO answers to a board of directors, so does humankind answer to God concerning the results of our dominion over creation. Are we meeting the objective?

Today we honor the work of Fred Myers, the founder of the Humane Society of the United States. He founded the Humane Society because of deep convictions he held about the cruelty to animals. Fred started the Humane Society in 1954 to address issues such as humane slaughter, dog and cock fighting, and the proper care of animals in shelters across the country, among

other issues concerning cruelty. He died only 10 years after starting the society but his foundational groundwork is still paying off today. To name a few of the Humane Society's accomplishments in 2007: they successfully banned animal fighting in the last two of the 50 states, they provided funding and education to local animal shelters and sanctuaries, and they responded to disaster areas to rescue thousands of animals. They also started a program called Animals and Religion. The present CEO of the Humane Society, Wayne Pacelle, says, "All of the world's major religions embrace the themes of mercy, compassion and other-centeredness. These are the same core values that underpin the animal protection movement. Our 'Animals and Religion program' recognizes these shared values, and calls upon religious people to act on these principles in their dealings with animals." Fred Myers' vision is still going strong.

One thing that Fred Myers said about his work is a remarkable correlation between humans and animals. This is what he said, "All thoughtful people recognize that cruelty is an evil that should be eradicated from our society, not merely for the

sake of animals, but for our own good. We know that cruelty, whether to animals or humans, causes in the person a moral and cultural erosion that is harmful to the whole society." He saw the treatment of animals as a sign of not only an individual's character but also the character of society at large.

I would like to take Fred's statement to another level. Cruelty is an addiction — an evil directed toward animals and humans. An addiction to the thrill of control over life and death, an addiction to the entertainment that cruelty provides, an addiction to evil. What I've noticed recently about cruelty is that it isn't limited to animals. We do it to each other too, sometimes without knowing it and sometimes when we do.

I've seen it in a recent advertisement for a new "reality show" called *Scare Tactics*. They show bizarre happenings where people are naturally frightened. Then the commercial ends with the host grinning and saying "Fear is funny." That seems to indicate that the whole idea is to scare the holy be-Jesus out of people just for the sake of laughing at them. Why is that funny? It reminded me of cockfights or dogfights where people purposely

starve these animals for the sheer pleasure of watching them try to kill each other.

Cruelty as entertainment isn't anything new, in Roman times people were doused in oil and set on fire to light Caesar Nero's dinner parties. In the coliseums it was great fun to watch gladiators fight to the death or to put people in the arena and let wild animals rip them apart. We say this is sick — but are we any different? We just changed the way we do it.

What is the difference between throwing people to the lions and dog fighting? Besides the human factor, it's still cruel. It still produces a gory death. What is the difference between scaring the holy be-Jesus out of someone and terrorizing an animal with beatings?

I'm not here today as an animal activist; I love animals and dislike the misuse and abuse of any creature. I'm more interested in pointing out that people are funny animals. We can be gentle and loving and at the same time painfully cruel. And that translates into a need for God's intervention in our lives, in our society. St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals,

believed that the world was created good and beautiful by God but suffers the need for redemption. He preached the duty of all creatures to praise God and the duty of people to protect and enjoy nature as the ones with dominion and as creatures ourselves.

God provides intervention and redemption in the person of Jesus Christ to all creatures. Jesus said that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love others. Our love should be spilling over into the dominion over creation. As Christians, we are meant to be the example of loving dominion by how we respond to injustices and cruelties to others and animals. Asking forgiveness for hurting someone, protecting the helpless, caring for the weak. Are we meeting the objective?

To the glory of God, Amen.