

August 20, 2017



“THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO DOGS”

Matthew 6:25-34

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As I’ve been preparing for this week, I’ve heard several people say to me, “I hear that your sermon is entitled, *The Gospel According to Dogs*, but what about cats?” I apologize to those who have pets other than dogs. We are happy to bless all of your pets later this morning in the Chambliss Outdoor Worship Center. I hope you don’t feel left out. In the interest of being more inclusive towards all of creation, I thought that I’d begin with a missing piece of the creation story that I found. Its original author is unknown, but perhaps it will help to care for any oversight on my part.

Apparently, one day after leaving the Garden of Eden:

Adam said, “Lord, when I was in the garden, you walked with me every day. Now I do not see you anymore. I am lonesome here and it is difficult for me to remember how much you love me.”

And God said, “No problem! I will create a companion for you that will be with you forever and who will be a reflection of my love for you, so that you will know I love you, even when you cannot see me. Regardless of how selfish and childish and unlovable you may be, this new companion will accept you as you are and will love you as I do, in spite of yourself.”

And God created a new animal to be a companion for Adam. And it was a good animal. And God was pleased. And the new animal was pleased to be with Adam and he wagged his tail.

And Adam said, “But Lord, I have already named all the animals in the Kingdom and all the good names are taken and I cannot think of a name for this new animal.”

And God said, “No problem! Because I have created this new animal to be a reflection of my love for you, his name will be a reflection of my own name, and you will call him DOG.”

And Dog lived with Adam and was a companion to him and loved him. And Adam was comforted. And God was pleased. And Dog was content and wagged his tail.

After a while, it came to pass that Adam's guardian angel came to the Lord and said, "Lord, Adam has become filled with pride. He struts and preens like a peacock and he believes he is worthy of adoration. Dog has indeed taught him that he is loved, but no one has taught him humility."

And the Lord said, "No problem! I will create for him a companion who will be with him forever and who will see him as he is. The companion will remind him of his limitations, so he will know that he is not worthy of adoration."

And God created CAT to be a companion to Adam. And Cat would not obey Adam. And when Adam gazed into Cat's eyes, he was reminded that he was not the supreme being. And Adam learned humility. And God was pleased. And Adam was greatly improved. And Cat did not really care one way or the other....¹

Now that I think of it, this may be why I have a dog. At the end of the day, Ginger loves me even when I'm not so lovable. Humility may be a lesson for me from time to time.

As I read our Scripture passage this past week, the words of Bobby McFerrin's song seemed to ring in my head: "Don't worry! Be happy!" In our lesson, it seems that much of creation resonates with these words.

Last week, as I watched the continued violence unfold in Charlottesville, my heart sank. When I heard of Heather Heyer's violent death as she came to lend her voice to speak out against hatred, violence, racism, injustice and oppression, my heart was breaking. So many emotions filled my being.

In the car one day, I found myself listening to the news and weeping as I heard the cries of people asking when will we, as human beings, stand up and speak out. They asked where our leaders were. They even questioned where our churches were as we find ourselves in this sad place in our nation's history. Throughout the week, I found myself in conversations with several people who simply needed a safe place to express their frustrations and concerns. Somehow, "Don't worry, be happy!" doesn't fit in where we might be as we gather this Sunday for worship. A message as light as "Don't worry, God has it all under control," just isn't enough as we culminate a week like the one that just passed. "Don't worry" seems to let us off the hook too easily. A message of "Don't worry" leaves me worried that we might neglect any action on our part in the hopes that this will all just go away. And God help us if we let moments like this just go away without ever calling out "evil" for what it is; without ever stopping to say, "ENOUGH!" in the hopes that our world will quiet down again. Today, "Don't worry" just isn't enough for me.

Our Scripture this morning is taken from a small portion of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew's gospel. Throughout his preaching on the hillside, Jesus addresses several

key teachings including the Beatitudes, prayer (even giving us The Lord's Prayer), being a faithful witness as salt of the earth or light in our world, the Law, giving, fasting, wealth, judgment, the "Golden Rule," as well as a whole host of others.

If we were to look at today's passage in its proper context, we would notice that just before this section, Jesus encourages his hearers to store up treasures for themselves in heaven rather than upon the earth; in essence, to be faithful stewards of what God has entrusted to their care rather than to be ruled by it.² In the verses that follow this passage, Jesus discusses judgment, reminding his hearers to be about the process of self-examination and avoiding a judgmental spirit. It's that whole piece about how we tend to focus on the removal of a speck from our neighbor's eye rather than the log in our own eye.³

The context of our lesson today seems to have more to do with how we live in relationship with what we possess as well as with one another. Jesus does not simply say, "Hey, don't worry about anything" as if to absolve us of responsibility for what happens in the world around us. Eugene Boring, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, writes, "The challenge to trust in God's providence does not exclude working and having property. The words are directed to people involved with sowing, reaping, storing in barns, toiling and spinning, but who are called to see that their life is not based on these things. Such people are not called to become birds or lilies, but to consider God's providence for all creation, including birds, lilies and human beings."⁴

It's as if creation itself seems to remind us how to live in relationship with one another and with God whose providence extends over all. For Jesus, our life and our role in creation is about more than striving for what we eat or wear. Rather, he culminates the passage saying, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and [God's] righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Strive first for God's kingdom and all that the kingdom represents.

Eugene Peterson, in his biblical paraphrase *The Message*, states our last two verses this way: "Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes."⁵

"Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions... Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now." How do we do that? What does it mean to strive for the kingdom of God in our world today? Just what is God doing right now? What are the values of the kingdom of God?

Last November, Dawn and I adopted a boxer from a rescue after a time of mourning our previous boxer who passed after a long struggle with cancer. Ginger, our new 18-month-old boxer, was so sweet when we first met her. It wasn't long, however, before we started to realize the baggage that rescues can bring along with them. We heard that she had been removed from her original home more than once before the county shelter was finally awarded custody in order to protect her. From there, she went to spend several months living in a foster home before she came to live with us.

As a result, Ginger had some “issues.” In addition to being “all puppy almost all the time” because of her age, she also struggled to know that the ones who cared for her would return to feed her and let her out. If we left her at home alone, she counter surfed and ran through the house opening all of our lever doors, trying to find us. She was never destructive, but rather panicked a little as she searched for us.

One requirement of her adoption was that she had to go through basic obedience training. We knew that we didn’t ever want her reactions to get worse so, in the first month, we took her to a trainer to start her classes. It wasn’t long before I realized that trainers don’t really train the dog so much as they train us to understand the dog. Part of understanding Ginger was understanding that she needed to know that we would be consistent in providing for her needs like going outside, feeding her, and returning for her at the end of a time away, whether it was 10 minutes or a few hours. I can’t tell you how often I would look at her and say, “I promise you, you are all right now,” hoping that she would understand that there’s no need to panic when we aren’t around.

My words, however, were not enough to ease her anxiety. Rather, it was the consistency, the practice, and our adapted responses that helped her to change her behavior. It’s almost like raising a kid, right? She had to know that she was safe, that we would provide for her needs, and she was ever so eager to be a part of our lives, too. When she realized that her needs would be met, her behavior changed. Yet, it took a lot of work for each of us to learn what this new relationship would mean for us. When we worked with her, she realized that we would never leave her for too long. In the end, as much as I thought I was teaching her, Ginger taught me so much more about myself and how much we have to work at our relationships with one another.

It took time for us to show Ginger a new way of living, but eventually persistence paid off in our training. In the same way, as disciples, we have the opportunity to make an impact upon the world. Sometimes, it takes more time than we expected to have that impact. Yet we must continue to live in ways that reflect the divine image of love until the world is transformed.

In a world where we still see the sins of racism, injustice, oppression and hatred which fuel violence and other evils, it is not enough to simply say, “Well, one day, by and by, when the kingdom comes, it will get better.” No, Jesus was clear. Just as surely as Dawn and I had to work at living in a new relationship with Ginger, we, as the body of Christ, must work to share the kingdom values and the life that God imagines for our world. As many who came to visit with me this past week have said, “We must speak up for what we believe.” Not only that, but we must live out the relationship with God and one another to which we have been called in Jesus Christ.

In the covenant made at our baptism, we commit to “resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” With every fiber of our being, we commit ourselves to proclaim and to live the life of the kingdom which we seek, a kingdom for which we pray so often, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

Knowing that love wins in the end does not exempt us from our responsibility to resist evil when we see it, but rather it emboldens us to live out love in such a way that the kingdom of God may

be seen in and among us now as surely as the rest of creation testifies to God's never-failing love and care for us.

In time, Ginger realized our love for her. I realized how much we are all a little like rescues who need some work to be reminded of God's presence with us even as we do the hard work of living into this kingdom reality.

St. Francis, often referred to as the patron saint of animals, was known for his love of creation. He is attributed as the author of a prayer we'll sing later this morning. Hear his words as our prayer this morning:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

If all of creation indeed points to the goodness of God, then let us reflect that goodness with all that we are. This past week, I was so thankful to be United Methodist when I noticed that in the midst of all of our nation's troubles, The United Methodist Church took out a full page ad in *USA Today* with a simple message from the Scriptures and a statement of who we are. It stated simply: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.—Romans 12:21" The ad concluded with two words: "Embrace love." What a powerful message we have to share. If our pets can remind us of God's love for us, might we not also be vessels of that love for our world?

¹ Original author unknown. From *How Dogs Teach Us About God: A Grow-Pray-Study Guide for Small Groups*. The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, 2016. 4.

² Matthew 6:19-21,24

³ Matthew 7:1-5

⁴ Boring, M. Eugene. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. viii. Ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 211.

⁵ Matthew 6:33-34, *The Message*.