

Life for the Earth: Respect for All
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As we gathered for worship this morning we said these words together. “There are many who say, **“O that we might see some good!”** **The light of your face shines on us, O God.** This passage is taken from Psalm 4, a Psalm of lament. Like many of the Psalms, Psalm 4 complains about life here on Earth, cries to God for help and guidance and ultimately admits that we know God is present and guiding us. This weekend as we celebrate Earth Day and I cannot help but notice how Earth Day is like a Psalm of lament. It inspires both complaint and praise in us. Earth Day is one of those days that come with celebration and fear. We celebrate what God has given us and the progress environmentalism has made over the past 20 years. We celebrate the media focus on the environment and the efforts to educate the public. We celebrate people like Donna Moore, Monica Neiderman, Juli Burnell and David Lauri, who gather together to make homemade detergent for us and organize carpools. The fear comes from facing the fact that we have not come far enough. We are still warming the planet at an alarming rate and we are still driving many species to the edge of extinction. The Christian response to the environmental movement is also like a Psalm of lament. Christians are recognizing the importance of environmentalism and even banding together to take action, yet many are still resistant or do not see the environment as an issue for religion. How do we effectively frame the environment as a Christian issue?

It was a bit over a month ago when Pastor Mike called me and asked me to deliver this prompting celebrating Earth Day. I’m sure it was his knowledge that I teach a section of environmental ethics to my intro students at UD each semester that prompted him to think of me. I excitedly said, “Yes”! Then he explained to me that I should talk about my environmentalism from the perspective of my faith. This seemed a reasonable request. It wasn’t immediately obvious to me how the two are related, but they had to be related in some way, right? Plus, I had weeks to figure it out. As the weeks passed, however, I found myself struggling to bring my faith and environmentalism together. After doing so much philosophy, environmentalism just seems logical. We all need to recognize how humans are interconnected with nonhumans and the land if we want to survive. It’s just logical - No need for faith there!

Then I started to remember that I haven’t always been a philosopher, I was actually once a child. I grew up in a rural area – Lysander, NY. I played in woods, ponds, fields and cornfields. It was a pretty nice childhood. I was also raised in a house that always had at least one pet – and at one time we had a dog, two cats, and two parakeets. My father could not let a stray animal go on homeless. He also had difficulty walking out of a humane society empty-handed. I inherited those traits from him and that is why our neighbors refer to our house as the “Lockwood Zoo”. Anyway, when a large, brown snake showed up in the tree in our family’s backyard, my brother went to “get rid of it”. My father explained quite firmly that we were to leave the snake alone. The tree was his home and we had no right to bother him. That snake grew fat and happy and lived in our backyard for years!

So began my relationship with nonhumans. I, of course, thought that not everyone must love and respect animals the way that I had been taught to, but at least they would not want to harm them. Then I got to college. I attended UD and was required to take a certain amount of religion courses. Being a philosopher, I thought Christian Ethics would be right up my alley. The course was taught by an Episcopal Priest with his own interpretation of the Bible that was not to be challenged. Ethical behavior, in his terms, was acting according to his interpretation of the Bible. So when I decided to write my term paper on the ethical treatment of animals, I should have known that I was doomed from the start. But, it had been my experience with the Priests at UD that they were open to good arguments - good arguments are the basis of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition., So, I wrote a paper that challenged my professors interpretation of Genesis 1:27-28, which reads;

27 And God created humankind as his image: as the image of God he created him male and female he created them. 28 And God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth and dominate it and rule fish of the sea, bird of the heavens, and every swarming creature on the earth.”

My professor had interpreted this to mean that the Earth and everything on it was here to do with as we wished. I argued that being a good leader or ruler of the Earth meant taking care of it and not exploiting it. Certainly factory farms, where animals are kept in small, crowded cages and fed full of chemicals, were not what an ethical ruler would allow. An ethical ruler would recognize her responsibility to support the thriving and flourishing of those she ruled. The Priest failed me.

Luckily, the academic review board saved my GPA by changing my grade to an “A.” While I had won that battle, I lost the war with Christianity. That was just one more instance of Christianity not supporting, accepting, or even making a little bit of room, for my politics. I encountered this problem frequently in my teens and 20s until I just gave up on religion all together. I did not give up on God – it knew it wasn’t Gods fault – but I could not be part of a Church any longer when they would preach of Jesus’ compassion, yet show none of that to the rest of the world. Thank God for Cross Creek!

Since then things have changed some. More churches are celebrating Earth Day and are coming to understand Psalm 104, our scripture for today, as praise for the greatness of God’s creation and not just a note to say “thank-you for the resources.” Organizations such as Ohio Interfaith Power and Light, and Dayton’s own Creation Connection have emerged and aim to take action to slow climate change. And, thanks to Sue Voisard, I’ve recently encountered a textbook where theologian, Barry Bandstra, explains that some may be misreading the passage from Genesis above. He explains that it was common for Rulers at the time of the writing of Genesis, to create statues or images of themselves, as reminders for the people they ruled, just who was providing for them. Humanity being made in God’s image might simply mean that we humans serve as reminders to the rest of creation that God provides for us all. This understanding of scripture makes room for the idea that we should act toward non humans as God would –

we should provide and care for them. If this is what's now being taught in seminary, we are on our way toward understanding environmentalism and the ethical treatment of animals as a direct request from God! Again, **there are many who say "O that we might see some good!" The light of your face shines on us, O God.**

Let us not think the picture is all rosy though. Learned interpretations of the Bible are hard to unlearn and there are still many arguing that we need to remember that we are God's preferred species. In the April 2008 issue of *Christianity Today*, Charles Colson argues that we need to remember that animals have no souls or "we might fall victim to the animal rights movement". He mockingly describes Christians who pray for their animals' health and their souls as misguided. He argues that the Bible says nothing of animals having souls – they don't go to Heaven. If we allow animals a place in the Kingdom, we are denying the unique position that God gave us. Luckily, I also found a letter in response to Colson's article from a woman who points out that, while the Bible never says that non human animals have souls, it also never says that they do not have souls. She posits the idea that, if non humans don't go to Heaven, it is only because God has a better plan for them. And so, the debate continues on the status of non humans in God's view.

We at Cross Creek are used to such debates. We tend to reconcile these debates in terms of the UCC's slogan "all are welcome". What would it mean to include non humans into that "all". What form would such a shift in thinking take for Cross Creekers? It is striking to me how much the Cross Creek community is a community of action. When we find injustice, we form a committee and off we go. So, as action oriented people, how do we put this new understanding of our charge to care for nonhumans into action? Like all important changes, this is a change that requires changing our attitudes and being willing to show the world our commitment. Here I turn to the advice of Jane Goodall and Marc Bekoff, authors of *The Ten trusts: What we must do for the animals we love*. These Ten Trusts are designed to increase our understanding of our place in creation as well as the place of non humans. I will share each trust with you, stopping to focus on a few that I believe will aid us in finding a spiritual approach to animals.

1. Rejoice that we are part of the animal kingdom

We share 97% of our DNA with primates, according to Goodall. I believe that recognizing this calls us to reject speciesism: Philosopher Peter Singer argues that anything that can suffer has moral value and deserves moral consideration. While Goodall attributes to animals a wide variety of emotions, I think we can at least agree that animals certainly feel physical pain. This alone makes them worthy of consideration.

2. Respect all life

Leopold: land pyramid a thing is right insofar as it protects the integrity and stability of the biotic community

3. Open our minds, in humility, to animals and learn from them

Biodiversity: how animals help each other

4. Teach our children to respect and love nature
5. Be wise stewards of life on Earth
6. Value and help preserve the sounds of nature
7. Refrain from harming life in order to learn about it

Zoos – AZA 200 accredited thousand unaccredited.

Conditions and treatment of animals

Programs to rehabilitate animals and release them into the wild

8. Have the courage of our convictions
Silence means approval
9. Praise and help those who work for animals and the natural world
Volunteer; make a donation to WWF or SICSA
10. Acknowledging that we are not alone and live with hope.
 - a. Recognize that humanity's specialness does not depend on the inferiority of other species. We have significant differences to set us apart, like reason and opposable thumbs.
 - b. Recognize that as God's people, we can do anything. We can save species on the edge of extinction and we can live in peace with nonhumans.

Taking these truths seriously requires taking our God-given duty to care for animals seriously and to make this part of our spiritual practice. Yes, we can pray for our four-legged friends and we can see God's unconditional love in their loyalty and friendship. We are lucky to have these creatures as gifts of god. **There are many who say "O that we might see some good!" The light of your face shines on us, O God.**

Amen.