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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Drawing the Line”

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Genesis 1:24-25

²⁴And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

Luke 12:6, 24

⁶Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. ²⁴Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!

"Drawing the Line"
Genesis 1:24-25; Luke 12:6, 24

Spitzbuben is very, very ill. Her heart is failing. A specialist is called in. Using all of her skill and thirteen years' experience to establish trust, she leans in close, looks straight into her patient's eyes and makes soft, reassuring sounds. The physician in charge says stiffly, "Please stop making eye contact with her. You'll give her capture myopathy." The consulting physician is a topnotch cardiologist from UCLA Medical Center, also a diplomate in psychiatry. There's just one problem. She's a people doc. Spitzbuben is a tamarin, an adorable rain forest monkey the size of a kitten. Locking eyes with their prey is what predators do, and it can have a deadly effect. It can cause a catastrophic surge of adrenaline which can poison their muscles. The overload of stress hormones can stop the heart. The specialist obeys. The little tamarin lives.

God, we hear in today's scripture, has a heart for animals, as well as for humans. Both are created on the same "day", a period of some 300 million years, says William Brown, theologian-scientist in his book *The Seven Pillars of Creation*. We tend to draw a line around Genesis as the only creation story. And while parts of it have caused more wrangling among Christians than what to serve at coffee hour, Genesis offers those lines of sweet assurance, "God saw everything that God had made, and it was very good." Us too. In this world of endless scrutiny and judgment, how we long to hear that one word, about ourselves, "Good." And God draws the human into sharing the joy of creation's goodness. God brings the animals and birds to let him say what he will **call** them, call, the same Hebrew verb, qara, used when God **called** the light "day", and the dark "night."

Isn't naming an act of love? Think about naming a baby, choosing an earthly label for a little wriggling bundle of promise. Or that rush of warmth and pleasure when we are called by a special nickname, inspired by acceptance and affection, beyond the legal record of our existence.

But William Brown sifts scripture for other creation records. Psalm 104 paints a canvas of young lions in the forests of the night, storks nesting in junipers, and Leviathan, the sea monster, created by God, as a **playmate**. The book of Job advises, "Ask: the birds of the air will tell you, the fish of the sea will declare to you, ask the animals, and they will teach you." (12:7-8).

The heart doctor who saved little Spitzbuben became intrigued with what the animal world could teach **her**. In her book, *Zoobiquity*, this year's common reading for our campus neighbor, she did not draw lines between animals and us. She went on a quest to understand Life. And what did she find? That for years, veterinarians had known that extreme fear could damage heart muscles, but only in the year 2000 did doctors for humans tout the discovery for people. What else could people doctors learn from veterinarians? And should they? She quotes Rudolf Virchow, called the father of modern pathology: "Between animal and human medicine there is no dividing line, nor should there be. . .the experience obtained constitutes the basis of all medicine."(p. 9).

How did we draw this line between the parts of the Creation God calls "good." Late in the 1800's land grant acts moved veterinary schools to rural areas. Medical schools arose in wealthier cities. Then around 1910, people began to leave the farm and its animals, concentrate in cities and move around by car, not horse. Money, prestige and academic rewards came from treating human patients. A line was drawn; the two worlds of discovery about the **natural** world were cut off from each other.

"Natural" has become a mantra we follow, when it suits us. "Natural" on labels equates with "good" and makes us feel healthier. "It's not **natural**" draws a line around **what** to condemn, or **whom**. Yet *Zoobiquity's* unflinching probe offers insights to ponder about our relationship to the "good creation". Before we **condemn** addicts, consider this. Eighty cedar waxwing birds, drunk on fermented berries, crashed into a glass wall in Southern California, still clutching the fruit in their beaks, without being hit with a FUI – "flying under the influence." Closely observed, much of animal social behavior can be classed as downright pornographic. It may not teach us what is moral, but it can help us understand our complex biological heritage and how better to deal with it, before we condemn. If in 1999 If we were looking for an expert pathologist, how many of us would have headed for the Bronx Zoo? (Of course, some of us would have been quite small then.) Why ask? Because that's where we would have found Tracey McNamara, a no-nonsense Queens native with a doctorate from Cornell and years of experience analyzing tissue samples. In 1999, she began to see crows dying on the sidewalks around her home. Soon exotic birds under her care at the zoo started dropping like flies. Analyzing magnified slides in her laboratory until all hours, she went sleuthing for answers to what ailed her charges. Outdoing even the X-files in sifting

clues, she ruled out bird-to-bird infection. The flamingoes and eagles were dying, but chickens and turkeys in the petting zoo were fine! Emus, highly susceptible to viruses, were fine too! Looking at who was housed indoors and who outside, she began to suspect . . . mosquitos!

Soon humans began appearing at emergency rooms with the same symptoms as the birds. A team from CDC, Center for Disease Control appeared, ran some tests on people and announced their conclusion. St Louis encephalitis! But Tracey was unconvinced. Mosquitos are carriers when they bite an infected bird and then a human. But the birds don't get sick. They're just carriers.

Tracey McNamara spent a whole summer studying her expired bird patients. By phone she offered her specimens and preliminary conclusions to the CDC, the federal Center for Disease Control. A grateful response? No! They HAD their conclusions, and she could just keep her specimens AND her ideas to herself! She called back. They hung up! So she sent tissue samples to two laboratories, one run by the United States Dept. of Agriculture. Did they find encephalitis? Negative! But what they did find freaked her out, totally! Whatever the "bug" was, it was only forty nanometers in diameter, that's one billionth of a meter, or an invisible speck on a yardstick, similar in size to yellow fever and dengue. Only to be handled in containment, with special clothing. McNamara had none.

The lab sent the finding to the CDC. No response. Fearing the worst for herself, Dr. McNamara went home and wrote her will.

But at 2:00 am, an inspiration! What she needed was a biohazard lab. The next morning she begged the U.S. Army infectious diseases lab at Fort Detrick, Maryland, to take a look. With the best scientific collaboration possible, the lab confirmed McNamara's suspicions. They had discovered the West Nile Virus, never before detected in the United States, nor in the entire Western Hemisphere.

WHY had the discovery taken so long? Because **Dr. McNamara**. . . is a veterinarian! Supposedly unbiased science had drawn the line between humans and animals. Therefore, Dr. McNamara's discoveries had nothing to teach human medicine.

How many lives could have been saved if from the beginning the human medicine “establishment” had listened to a veterinarian? In the years since, nearly a thousand humans, besides animals and birds have died of West Nile. But, here **have** been lessons learned. In 2006, a new department was formed in the CDC for animal to human infections, headed by a veterinarian. Around the world, the web now tracks information from hunters, hikers and birdwatchers about animal illness. Major universities have widened avenues of sharing between their medical and veterinary schools. And a growing community of “vets” and “docs” has realized that the health of **all** patients depends on open dialogue that they themselves can create - a “zoobiquitous” approach. At Tufts University in Massachusetts a program has paired children and dogs with similar heart ailments, to help demystify the ailment for the kids and their worried parents. Winter, the dolphin with the prosthetic tale from the movie inspires humans who have artificial limbs. (“If you can swim, I can walk.”) And so we learn to see the gifts of ALL God’s creatures, one to another. Imagine for a moment living without the lines we have drawn, the ones we **think** must divide. . . animal from human, old from young, (they are just labels after all), gay from straight, the acceptable from the rejected, and humbled by its amazing diversity, take our joy-full place in the creation God called, “good”.



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