

## DISCOVER WHAT WE CAN LEARN THROUGH NATURE

Job 12: 7-10

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
23 April 2017

Last week, on Easter Sunday, with a full church, we talked about the good news that is afoot in the world. We are called to pay attention to it, because in the midst of those good news stories is where we find God at work. Those stories draw us in, and God then invites us in to be a part of that good work.

Today my focus is on this question: "How do we sustain our motivation over the long haul?" It's one thing to feel passionate on Easter Sunday morning, with every seat taken, with the church full of spring colors. But how do we maintain our enthusiasm, day after day, in season and out of season?

When we read the gospels, we can see that sometimes Jesus talked to large crowds, and sometimes Jesus talked just to his followers, to the insiders, the disciples and other close friends. His message was slightly different to each group of people. And so today, my message is for you, the people who come to church the Sunday AFTER Easter. You, the people who are here week in and week out. How are we going to be the church and embody the good news, even on days when we don't feel like it?

You see, almost any of us, without a lot of effort, can rally our faith during a crisis. If you or someone you know is experiencing an emergency of some kind, you can find the spiritual strength to help you through. But living the good news is a marathon, not a sprint. How do you keep your own spiritual well from going dry? How do you keep yourself spiritually nourished so that you maintain your passion and your enthusiasm? How do you keep the cynicism and apathy at bay?

That's the question I invite you to ponder today. I hope that by the time we have left worship today, you will be more aware of exactly what kinds of experiences your spirit needs. We're each a little different, and we each need a variety of spiritual vitamins. Just as your body needs different kinds of foods in order to function optimally, so do our spiritual lives. Some people need quiet in order to rekindle their spirits, some need reading - the therapy of the right words - and some respond best to music. We also need exposure to the natural world, and that's what we're going to specifically talk about today, on this day after Earth Day. What are the gifts of nature that provide the best food for our souls?

The word "pericope" means a short passage extracted from scripture. What we have as our reading for this morning is a pericope from the book of Job. As we have heard, it is admittedly plucked out of context. But it fits with other general themes from the biblical canon, other verses which speak to us of the glory of God discovered through nature. Until this spring, I was not familiar with this passage from Job, but I have come to love it for its simplicity.

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living being and the breath of every human being." Nature is a portal to God.

As I was preparing this sermon, I asked members of the church to share with me their own stories of what they have learned through animals, plants and nature. I received dozens of responses, much more than I can share in this one sermon. (Thanks, everyone! I also want to thank Lou Suarez for his helpful scripture commentary which you can read online or pick up at the Welcome Center and Tim Schulz for his beautiful message about the environment he shared with you in February.)

What do we learn from animals? The overwhelming response I received was this one phrase: animals teach us about unconditional love. One woman said, "I love the way my dog

greet me when I come in the back door every night. There he sits, asking for nothing, just happy to see me. I often think, 'What if I greeted each family member at the door like that? Not questioning where they had been, why they didn't do something, just letting them know how happy I am to see them...' Another person puts it this way: "My dogs have taught me so much. Simply put: it doesn't matter to them if I'm fat or thin, what race I am, what religion I believe in, whether I'm gay or straight, whether I live in a large home or small home; whether I make a fortune or am under the federal poverty guidelines, they love me for me! When I'm happy they celebrate with me, when I cry they are right by my side to comfort me." In short, dogs don't judge. They rarely hold grudges. They can suffer abuse at the hands of humans, but they are resilient and quick to learn to trust again.

We have several horse-lovers in our church. One of them wrote me this. "When I ride my horse it is one of the few times I am successful in turning off my "monkey mind" and being completely in the moment, truly present. After a ride, I feel at peace, completely free of stress. I'm so happy that I can share this experience with my daughters. Riding and loving our horses is the best way I have found to get the girls off their phones, out of the house, and enjoying nature. We often say there is barn time and there is real time."

Similarly, one member finds her daily walk with her dog extremely therapeutic. Here's how she describes it: "Our 3 1/2 year old golden joyfully greets every person who walks by, whether she knows them or not. It is as if she is saying, "Don't you think life is wonderful?" She doesn't demand much from life or make judgments, but rather lives authentically in the present, as dogs do, and reminds me to do the same. We walk in our own rhythm, responding to each other's movements and steps and taking in the familiar environment, not needing to communicate verbally."

Some of you know my friend Kim Langley who has spoken at several church events. She found this poem about learning from a dog - I hope you find it as delightful as I did:

Who knew that the sweetest pleasure of my fifty-eighth year  
would turn out to be my friendship with the dog?

That his trembling, bowlegged bliss at seeing me stand there with the leash  
would give me a feeling I had sought throughout my life?

Now I understand those old ladies walking  
their Chihuahuas in the dusk, plastic bag wrapped around one hand,

content with a companionship that, whatever  
else you think of it, is totally reliable.

And in the evening, at cocktail hour,  
I think tenderly of them

in all of those apartments on the fourteenth floor  
holding out a little hotdog on a toothpick

to bestow a luxury on a friend  
who knows more about uncomplicated pleasure

than any famous lobbyist for the mortal condition.  
These barricades and bulwarks against human loneliness,

they used to fill me with disdain,  
but that was before I found out my metaphysical needs  
could be so easily met

by the wet gaze of a brown-and-white retriever  
with a slight infection of the outer ear  
and a tail like a windshield wiper.

I did not guess that love would be returned to me  
as simply as a stick returned when it was thrown

again and again and again--  
in fact, I still don't exactly comprehend.

What could that possibly have to teach me  
about being human?" ("Fetch", by Tony Hoagland)

Oh, but they do, don't they? They teach us so much about being human. They listen to  
us. There are many stories about the ways that therapy dogs have proven to be miracle-  
workers in a wide variety of situations. That might make a whole other sermon sometime!

Not everyone is an animal lover, or someone who can share their living space with a pet. There are other ways that the natural world can nurture our spirits. Listen to this lesson I received this week by email: "I am struck by the tenacity of plants. When we moved to Avon Lake over 30 years ago I frequently walked in the woods with my kids. A large tree fell over in a storm and nearly crushed a sapling. Several branches were broken off and the small tree was pinned horizontal to the ground. After a year or so the sapling continued to grow, with the top of the small tree reaching up to the sky, but the base of the trunk still horizontal to the ground. Many years went by and the remains of the large tree that nearly crushed it had completely decayed, leaving the tree to continue to grow. Now, 30+ years later, the tree, while still deformed - its base still horizontal, continues to flourish. This shows that no matter what life puts in our way we need to continue to grow and thrive."

Most of you know we have a landscape artist in our church. I want to read you this beautiful reflection by C.J.: "I can't even begin to tell you how very blessed I am that for 30 years, when I head to the office, I arrive in God's amazing outdoor office! All day, 12 to 14 hours filled with nature, birds, trees, bugs, bees, plants, animals, sun, rain and lots and lots of dirt. My day starts off with the most beautiful sound in the world. Robins telling me to get up and come outside, woodpeckers telling me that there is work to do, chickadees telling me to make time for play. Birds have shown me that early mornings are the best part of the day! I spend all day planting trees, trees and more trees, shrubs and flowers, over and over; I'm still amazed at the beauty of them all. The texture, the scents, the intricate details of the structure of each plant, the growing patterns that God created. I love the feel of the earth's soil; it's the foundation we walk on, the ground where we grow our valuable crops and plants. I have learned to appreciate all it provides - the worms and bugs - they all have a job and deserve respect. I must say that patience is the greatest gift I receive from caring for the plants and trees. It can take as long as five years for a young pine tree to produce pine cones - that's a lot of patience. It takes approx-

imately three years for a landscape to establish itself. The first year the plants sleep, the second they creep and the third year they leap! Patience. At the end of my day the robins sing again, telling me it's time to rest, another valuable lesson from the birds and from God."

In our era of constant distractions, many people find that spending time in nature is more valuable than ever. Here are a few more lessons from nature you shared with me. "There is real peace in the garden: birds sing, the wind whistles, there are no phones or TVs to distract you, and all you hear is nature's quiet, peaceful voice. I can totally lose myself in the digging and planting." "For me I have found hiking and fishing to be time away from man-made noise and distractions. Time in the woods is time unwinding. It resets my mind and fills my lungs and blood with fresh air. I value the time away from a phone and a computer. I value the time I spend with others outdoors. The conversations are genuine and relaxed."

Our time with nature, with pets, our time out on the water can seem self-indulgent, a luxury. I contend that it is essential; it is our spiritual nutrition. And it calls us back into the world, refreshed and renewed, ready again to be of service to God, to God's world and God's people. Here's how one theologian puts it: "The capacity and willingness to become small, to acknowledge the primacy of the living world, to open oneself completely to the life of the world, and to do so without any aim beyond the simple pleasure of the gesture itself: such unselfconscious simplicity and innocence can become the foundation of a more responsive and reciprocal way of being in the world." Times of wonder and awe lift our spirits, reminding us of the glory and transcendence of God, the God who then calls us back down to earth only to be sent out again into the woods or the garden or the lake or the horse barn - our lives going in and out of nature like the tide, all in service to the Creator of all Beauty.