

God's Wild Kindom

Luke 12:22-31

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First Central Congregational UCC

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There was a weekly Sunday tradition in my family's home as I was growing up, and I suspect it was a tradition in many of your homes. We'd gather in front of the television to watch *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. Marlin Perkins and Jim Fowler brought adventure and excitement into our home every week. How many of us first saw a lion take down a gazelle while watching *Wild Kingdom*? This year is the fiftieth anniversary of the show. It first aired on January 6, 1963 and ran regularly until 1988.

Our member Bill Wiseman, Tracy and Wendy's dad, worked on Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom account. It was his job to market and grow it. Bill was the author of those famous, or some would say infamous, segues, "Just as the mother lion protects her cubs, so does your policy from Mutual of Omaha protect your family."

Over the years Jim Fowler would, and still does, come to town with some exotic animal which he shows off at a school or public event. Wendy tells stories from when she was a little girl and Jim Fowler would cover over to the house. He couldn't just leave the exotic animal in the car, so he would bring it inside. The Wiseman's dog and cat would go nuts.

Bill once had the opportunity to go on safari with Marlin Perkins and Jim Fowler. They went to Africa to film a wildebeest migration. Wendy shared that it was a moving experience for her dad and that he learned a lot from the Masai guides and from Marlin Perkins' compassion.

Wendy says that her dad wouldn't hurt any animal or insect, and passed that along to them as kids. He wouldn't even let them squash a spider in the bathtub. He would say, "What would Marlin Perkins think of that?" From her dad and watching the show, she learned about both the circle of life and compassion for all living things.

This Easter season we are participating in Mission 4/1 Earth, fifty days of Easter greening, focusing on environmental activity and advocacy. In worship we have focused our attention on the connections between nature and spirituality, the role that creation plays in our faith and theology.

In today's gospel from Luke we hear Jesus speak about God's attention to the creation. Jesus tells the disciples not to worry, to live by faith and trust. He advises them not to strive for worldly things, but to strive always for the kingdom of God. We can live as people of faith because of God's care for the creation. Jesus illustrates this lesson with the examples of the ravens and the lilies. The ravens do not sow or reap, yet God provides for them. And the lilies, they neither toil nor spin, yet they are things of beauty. To quote the more evocative language of the King James Version, "Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

This familiar teaching of Jesus reveals a profound truth about God and about the creation. God loves everything that God has created. Theologian Norman Habel writes, "Creation itself is an act of divine grace, of God's unrequited love." Everything about God's relationship to creation is an act of love. God gives birth to it, declares it good, blesses it and nurtures it, sustains it and rejoices in it. God redeems, renews, and heals the creation. Throughout my reflections this week, I was drawn to the powerful mothering images. Like a good mom, God sees what creation needs and provides it, even arraying us in beauty like the lilies.

We are used to seeing nature as "red in tooth and claw," and that is true, as we all learned by watching *Wild Kingdom*. Who can forget a crocodile rising out of the water to grab a wildebeest in its jaws? But increasingly biologists have discovered how much cooperation, nurture, and altruism exist within animal species. Norman Habel believes that this reveals a spiritual dimension to the natural order – there is a spiritual impulse of nurture deep within Earth and its creatures. Habel believes this is God's spirit moving in nature. God's love of creation has overflowed into the creation itself. In this way even animals and plants participate in the image of God, expressing divine attributes.

Western thought has long emphasized a distinction between humanity and the rest of creation. We have viewed ourselves in a great chain of being, a hierarchy, where we rise above animals and plants. We have placed ourselves in a completely separate metaphysical category.

One of the challenges of evolutionary theory was that it placed humanity within the animal kingdom. It tells us that we are not distinct, but are, in fact, related to the rest of life on this planet. I believe much of the opposition to Darwinian theory is not so much religious in nature, as it is a wounded pride. Many people seem to be offended by the idea that they are biologically related to apes and birds and fish and fruit flies and fungi.

A powerful theme in Native American spirituality is our relationship to the rest of creation. The Lakota use a phrase that many of us have embraced as part of our mission work on the Pine Ridge Reservation -- *mitakuye oyasin*, which means "for all my relations." It is not limited to one's human family, but includes all two-leggeds and four-leggeds and winged creatures in an ever-expanding circle of all living things.

We are grateful to our indigenous sisters and brothers, for their wisdom has helped us to recover elements of our own tradition. For this image of kinship is present in our biblical tradition. The Hebrew Scriptures reminds us that we are formed of the same mud and clay as the animals, that we are all animated by God's breath of life, that without God's nurture and sustenance, we would all expire. In the creation story in Genesis chapter two, the animals are brought to the first man so that they might be partners with him. And in the Book of Job, which we explored in worship last autumn, we are told that our human needs are not the center of the universe, but are part of a much broader creation where God's wildness is expressed in God's relationship with the animals. In October our children performed a wonderful drama of God's speech from the whirlwind in which God celebrates the wild animals. None of us will forget the delightful images of the great whale emerging from the sacristy or of the hippo rising up from beside the chancel.

God loves us human beings, cares for us, nurtures us, but God also loves and nurtures the creatures of this planet. They are also children of God, our brothers and sisters, part of our family. They are our kinfolk.

Today's gospel ends with the admonition that we are to strive for the kingdom of God. In the later decades of the 20th century, many people began to explore this language of "kingdom," wondering if a better term could be fashioned. One I have heard quite often is "kindom of God." This image reminds us that God's purpose is to build relationships, and that these relationships are not limited to human society.

In Luke 12 Jesus reminds us of God's love and nurture for birds, flowers, and ourselves. Then Jesus invites us to strive for the things of God. I believe Jesus is inviting us to become part of God's wild kindom, living in wholeness with the creatures of this planet. We are being invited into the same relationship of nurture, love, and care that God expresses.

And it makes since. If we are to draw closer to God and model ourselves on God, then surely we should learn to love with the breadth that God loves. And God loves all of God's children – spiders and squid, gorillas and lions, mountain goats and earthworms, corals and great whales, and us.

Just like a mother lion cares for her cubs, so does God protect all of her children. That's an insurance policy you can rely upon.