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So, if you haven't been part of our worship community the last few years — every summer I like to take some time out to talk about the questions that you've asked. That's a reminder that worship should be participatory, that it shouldn't just be me blabbing on for hours and hours while you listen. You should get a chance to ask the good questions, which you have this year. So, all summer long, I'm going to be answering questions that you submitted.

And this week, we are looking at the question: what did John Wesley teach us about the care of animals?

I'm going to get there, but before I do, I've got to take us through Scripture, and I've got to take us through a millennium and a half of Christian thought to get to where John Wesley came from. And then I want to go a little bit further than that, and talk about what it means for us today.

So we're going to start off with the Hebrew prophets. We're going to go to the words of Christ. We're going to talk about the theologians of the first fifteen hundred years of the Christian church. We're going to get to John Wesley, and then we're going to end up with our modern United Methodist Church teachings on the rights and responsibility to care for animals.

We're going to start off with that passage Allan shared with us from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah — who oddly enough was a bullfrog, so he was part of the animal kingdom. Come on, we can laugh at that. Jeremiah, no — he is one of those fiery prophets of Israel, one of the people who comes and condemns the way of life of the people of Jerusalem and Judah. He calls them out for their waywardness, how they have walked away from their God.

Jeremiah does this cleverly. He compares the waywardness of God's people to the animals around them. Essentially, what he says is: look at the animals. Look at creatures like the stork, who just knows the right season for everything, who is so in tune with creation that the stork just goes along with it, just lives it, doesn't question it. Jeremiah says, if the animals around you, if those creatures around you, can just follow the natural order of creation, why do you have such a problem with it? Why is it so hard for you human beings to do that?

Jeremiah compares the people's faithfulness — or lack of faithfulness — to how well they are integrated with the rest of creation. The human being has separated itself from the rest

of the natural order, and that has led to their waywardness from God. The closer we get to how creation was set up in the first place, the closer we will walk with our God.

Let me move now to the words of Christ — the parable of the lost sheep. This is one of the more common parables Jesus tells; we're pretty familiar with it. Jesus tells of the love of God by comparing it to a shepherd who leaves the flock to go after one lost sheep. Jesus frames the love that God has for us from a position of caring for the welfare of a single animal — that when we are thinking about the ways God loves us, we are to think about how we might love a single creature.

I wonder if, when Jesus was originally telling this parable, he was thinking about that passage from the book of Proverbs: the righteous care for the needs of their animals. You see, woven throughout the Scriptures — the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament — are these pastoral images and warnings about the need to care for the animals around us, and that caring for them connects us to the way God loves us. And when we fail to care for the animals around us, we fail to understand the way God loves us.

Remember the book of Jonah? Jonah goes to Nineveh, and as he is preaching to the people of Nineveh, they convert to worship God. Jonah is so depressed over it, because he hates the people of Nineveh. He goes out into the wilderness and complains: God, why did you send me there? I would rather the Ninevites all just perish rather than have them worship you. And God says, did you think about the people? And then goes one step further: did you think about the animals? — as if God's care for the people of Nineveh wasn't complete until God reminds us that God also cared for all the animals living in that city.

In fact, if you go back to the very beginning of Scripture, back to the book of Genesis, the story of creation — animals come first, before people. In fact, Genesis tells us that human beings didn't even eat animals until after the flood. Humans are placed in the garden to care for and serve the animals, not the other way around. Perhaps, right from the beginning, we are being taught to understand how God loves and cares for us by learning to love and care for the critters around us.

All right, that's my very brief foray into the Scriptures and how they describe the care for animals. Let me talk about our theological heritage, because beginning at least in the 2nd century CE — and probably before that — theologians have been thinking about the role Christians play in caring for animals.

Irenaeus, all the way back in the second century, taught that the world was, in a sense, horseshoe-shaped. I don't know if he would have used that imagery, but I will. The beginning of the world and the end of the world were so similar, because both would be a time when we were in perfect relationship with God. Irenaeus taught that it's not just

people who will be restored to a perfect relationship with God — it is the animals that will experience that restoration as well.

Basil of Caesarea, in the 4th century, delivers a series of homilies on the six days of creation. In those homilies he marvels at the role animals play in the world of creation, and he suggests that human beings should try to emulate the animals. Jeremiah suggested that all the way back in his prophecies — that human beings should look to the animals for inspiration. Jesus talks about that in some of his parables and stories — that we should look to the animals for inspiration on how we might live perfectly with God. For Basil, the animals were to become the teachers.

John Chrysostom, in the fifth century, one of the great orthodox fathers, believed that humans had dominion over the animals. He got that from Genesis. But when he talked about dominion over the animals, he was not talking about a license to do as we please — he was talking about a call to servanthood and moral responsibility for the animals around us.

And then, finally, in the 12th century, we have **Francis of Assisi**. We sang one of his hymns just a few moments ago. Francis would talk about animals as his siblings — did you notice that in the hymn we sang? All that familial imagery Francis uses when talking about creation — brothers and sisters and mothers — that creation itself is intimately related to us, and that we are called to love our creation. Francis would go and preach to the animals around him, not just the people he met.

That brings us to our Wesleyan heritage. John Wesley addresses the role animals play in the created order in one of his sermons. The sermon is titled "The General Deliverance." I don't know if you know this, but John Wesley had some great sermon titles. He has a sermon called "The Circumcision of the Heart" — that's a beautiful title for a sermon. He has other sermons with really boring titles, like "The General Deliverance."

"John, what's this sermon about?" "Oh, it's a general sermon on deliverance." "What are you going to call it?" "Oh, The General Deliverance." "Okay."

Not the best title for a sermon, I don't think. But in that sermon, he names that animals are not able to sin, and yet they still suffer. He uses that to understand a theology of sin and suffering — that one does not have to sin in order to suffer, that we can suffer because of the sins of another. It is human beings that sin, and that sin leads to the suffering of all creation, not just the one who has sinned.

Wesley talks about how, in the beginning, humans and all animals and everything existed in a perfect relationship with their Creator. Yet it was the sinfulness of human beings that

brought about suffering into that creation — not just suffering for the humans, but for all the animals and all of creation.

Wesley taught that it was human beings who were to be the teachers for the animal kingdom. That's what stewardship meant in a Wesleyan understanding — that we would learn of the love of God, and that we would teach that love to all creation. And when we failed to do that, when we failed to be as loving to creation as God was loving to us, suffering entered the picture.

Like Irenaeus, Wesley taught that part of the restoration of creation — the eschatological hope, we would call it — was the restoration not only of humanity but of all creation, including the animal kingdom. And he talked about how it was possible that, in that restoration, the relationship with God would not only be restored — it would in fact be better than it had ever been before. Animals are included in God's love that is restoring the world.

We've been talking about the teachings of John Wesley all year long, so I hope one of the ideas that will come into play here is that we, as Christians, are not just supposed to sit around and wait for God to fix everything. We have a role to play in partnering with God in recreating, restoring, and healing what has been broken. That's the point of sanctification — that we begin to grow and act more godlike as our faith develops.

So I think I can say that a Wesleyan understanding of the care of animals is that we are supposed to be doing the work now of easing the suffering that our sinfulness has caused in the animal kingdom. That is our role as Christians in the world — to ease the suffering that has entered creation.

But on a more fundamental level, I think it would also be fair to say that Wesley would see the way we treat animals as a sign of our faith — that the way we treat animals would reveal the state of our own hearts. The way we express our faith outwardly would show whether we are pleasing or displeasing to God in a moment. In every way that we live, including how we treat those who are suffering, our hearts are revealed.

What do we do with this? Well, our Social Principles in the United Methodist Church today speak to the care of all creation. Our Social Principles affirm that creation belongs to God and is a manifestation of God's goodness and care, and that we — human beings, nonhuman animals, plants, and other sentient and non-sentient beings — participate in the community of creation. The flourishing of creation depends on our ability to care for all of God's creation. Rather than treating creation as a place for human use and consumption, we are called to practice responsible stewardship and to live in right relationship with our Creator and with the whole of creation.

And then, perhaps, we are invited to go back to Luke 15 — back to that image of the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep. The shepherd would know the actual value of that sheep — monetarily, at least, the shepherd would know how much that individual sheep is worth, and how much the other ninety-nine were worth. But the shepherd doesn't stop for a moment to calculate the worth of the sheep. The shepherd doesn't weigh the suffering of the sheep against the shepherd's own ease of living. Rather, the shepherd knows the suffering of his sheep and simply goes, and serves — goes to steward and goes to care.

Our heritage — from our Scriptures, to the great thinkers of our faith, to our own denominational teachings — all point us to see animals not as commodities or conveniences, but as fellow creatures under God's care. Creatures who suffer today because of our actions, but who are also caught up in the promise of God's full restoration. Something that we, as a church, as a people of God, are called not to sit and wait for, but to be participants in.

We are to participate in the salvation of the world. We are to become more like Christ in the way that we treat one another, in the way that we love one another, in the way that we care not only for one another, but for all of creation.

Prayer

Friends, let us be in an attitude of prayer.

Holy God, what a joy it is to be able to live in this world with all the wonderful critters that surround us — for the giraffes and the blue whales and the ants and the groundhogs. Even for all of those critters that share this world with us, we give thanks, and we remember our responsibility to care with love. I pray in Christ's name.

Amen.