

# Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, September 22, 2024

“Love and Animals”

## *Young at Heart Message*

One of our musicians, Michael Funk, wanted to incorporate what he calls a “Creature Feature” into our service today as part of our Young at Heart Message.

But, he felt like he wasn't comfortable doing it himself, so I said I would incorporate it into our message today.

Most Sundays I try to offer a Young at Heart message as part of the Sunday sermon.

I do this for two reasons:

The first is because we no longer regularly have children present in worship, but if children do show up, I hope having a more accessible preliminary sermon is helpful and enjoyable for them.

The second is because often adults learn just as much from these messages as kids do!

Since we are all young at heart, I try to be creative with this part of the message.

So, Michael brought this animal for me to use today. His Dad received it as a gift at his school where he was a caretaker.

What kind of animal do you suppose this is?

I think it's probably a tiger, but since it's not coloured like any real animal, it could be a striped lion I suppose as well.

The fun thing about this tiger is that it isn't just a pretty face - it also sings and dances!

I'll play it for us, though some of you may not be able to hear it.

If you didn't hear it, the tiger sings and dances to the song “Wild Thing.”

If you aren't familiar with the song, it goes “Wild Thing! You make my heart sing! You make everything groovy. Wild thing! Wild Thing, I think I love you.”

If that doesn't sum up how most of us feel about our pets, I don't know what does!

Wild thing, I think I love you - even though you chewed up my shoes, or got muddy paw prints all over the floor, or got excited and jumped on the curtains and knocked them down.

Wild thing, I think I love you when you look at me with those loving eyes, or when you sing me a pretty song, or when you do something cute and endearing.

This tiger is funny and silly, but it introduces our sermon today in a fun way, and it is a gentle reminder that we are called to be caring and respectful toward all of God's living, created beings.

### ***The Message***

Those of you who know some of my story before I moved to Calgary know that in my previous life - and at this point it truly does feel like a completely different life - I owned a dog daycare and boarding facility where I also worked with people to help train their dogs.

And while my expertise was in dog behaviour specifically, I have been surrounded by animal lovers of all kinds for a very long time.

I have shared my life with cats, dogs, hamsters, fish, frogs, a rabbit, turtles and a variety of other beings over the years.

I know the level of attachment that can occur when we are caring for one of God's creatures.

I know the heartache when we lose one of our best friends - a being that we cared for, spent time with, and loved.

I know that there are times when it feels like our pets are the only ones in the world who truly understand us or will listen without judgement.

We have come to know the spirits of the animals we share our lives with on a deep level, and many people that I have talked with and worked with over the years will attest to a deep and unexplainable connection with their pets.

Likewise, there are many people who lean on the power of spiritual connection with wild animals.

There are books and resources available to help us understand our spirit animals, and indigenous people for generations have understood the connection between humans, animals, and the environment.

I cannot imagine that these relationships and connections with animals were not divinely inspired or created by and through God.

We have been placed here on earth to care for God's creation in all its forms, including other humans.

But for those of us who share our lives with animals, we also know that God must have created animals to care for us as well.

Certainly, animals across the globe are bred to feed humans and nourish us, and that is a form of care.

Since the beginning of human existence, animals have worked with humans to help with agriculture, food acquisition, search and rescue, safety and protection, sniffing out specific odours, and of course deep companionship.

When we lose an animal that has been an important part of our lives, we grieve just like we might grieve over the loss of a family member or friend.

When I first began my ordination conversations with the committee that would ultimately decide if I was ordination material, one of the things I talked a lot about was the spiritual connection I have to my dogs.

The first dog I shared my life with who was mine and not a family dog walked with me on my journey through life in ways that I couldn't even truly begin to appreciate at the time.

His name was Kodiak, and he moved into a new dwelling every single year of his 7-year long life with me.

He journeyed with me as I learned how to become a dog trainer.

He graciously allowed me to make a boatload of mistakes in his training and his care, and he still ended up being an incredible dog.

He began my journey into understanding dog behaviour and learning theory.

And, my journey with him led me down the path toward pastoral care and care for people in ways that I could not imagine had I not learned those skills through my experience with him and working with people who were deeply connected to their animals.

During my ordination process, I mentioned several times the importance of not just my connection with my own animals, but what I saw with my clients and their connection to their animals.

Over and over again, in my life and in the lives of everyone I worked with, I saw people connect with their animals in ways that can only be described as spiritual.

People would tell me how their animals helped them through so many difficult situations, and they would express deep and profound grief when they thought about losing their animals.

I am convinced that incorporating animals into our spiritual life is essential for many people.

In the book *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* by Madeleine L'Engle, a deeply Christian author, she writes about the main character's connection with the dog Ananda.

The main character connects with Ananda through a simple touch, and the dog helps her connect spiritually to her brother who is off in another time period fighting to save the world she is in from destruction.

This spiritual and Godly connection with animals is a theme throughout literature, but it is also a theme throughout the Bible.

I have an entire book which references all of the animals mentioned in scripture.

Today, for example, we heard two different passages out of the many that include references to animals.

I preached a few months ago about Job, and when I gave that sermon, I summarized the entire book of Job.

The scripture we heard today is one of God's responses to Job's complaining heart.

God asks Job if Job wants to be the one doing God's job.

God reminds Job that the world is complex, that living beings all have their own sense of autonomy and decisions they make both with regard to their survival and with regard to their own pleasure and happiness.

Job's suffering is not the only thing happening in the world at that moment, and there are other beings that God is also responsible for.

God understands creation in ways that Job, and by extension all of us, could never fully understand.

When people try to explain their connection to their animals, they often have difficulty describing it.

Many people will describe their relationship with their pets as similar to that of their children.

But there is often something even deeper at play.

I think it has to do with the fact that we learn to communicate with beings that cannot communicate with us verbally.

We have to develop a much deeper connection with them in order to understand each other. In my formerly professional opinion, it is not all about giving commands and ordering our pets around.

Humans create meaningful connection with their pets that goes beyond an owner/subordinate relationship.

There is a deep and profound spirituality that comes when we discover this ability to communicate with our pets.

For example, I recently discovered without doing any training at all with my dog Kanyon, that he understood a new cue from me that I had never taught him.

He sleeps on the bed with me, and I have a big body pillow down the middle of the bed so that he doesn't push me off the bed.

Sometimes, before I get into bed at night, I find him lying on my side of the bed.

I used to kick him off the bed and let him get back onto his side of the bed on his own.

However, one night, I just said to him, "switch sides buddy" and made a circle gesture to indicate I needed him to move over to the other side of the pillow.

To my complete surprise, he got up and moved over to the other side of the pillow.

At first I thought perhaps it was just a fluke.

But, the next time it happened, I did the same thing, and he moved.

Now, almost every night, we do the same thing, and he consistently moves without me ever having taught him a cue.

This happened because of the nature of our relationship, and the spiritual connection we have that allows us to communicate with one another despite the fact that we will never share a common verbal language.

I could talk all day about the connection we share with our animals so if that's something you're interested in, grab me after worship.

But, I will spare you for now, and leave you with this final word.

May you lean into your relationship with your animals, if you have pets living in your home with you.

And, if you do not have animals in your home, I invite you to explore the possibility of connection to animals outside of your home.

For example, appreciating the birds singing in the trees, the squirrels jumping from branch to branch, the deer peacefully eating along the side of the road, the coyote playfully hunting mice in the fields, or any other opportunity you might have to experience a connection with God's creatures.

As you do so, take the time to thank God for all of the ways these animals help us and guide us along our spiritual path.

May God's creatures be a blessing to you in a myriad of ways. Amen.

Let us pray:

Holy God, we thank you for the gift of animals in our lives. Through all of the creatures you have placed on earth, you have brought many blessings and opportunities. Today we pause to name our gratitude for the living beings we share our lives with in a variety of different ways.

Thank you, God, for the love and compassion we hold and the opportunity we have been given to be stewards of your magnificent creation. Amen.