

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, May 2, 2017

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of John 10:1-11

¹⁰ “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

This ends the reading from the Gospel of John. Thanks be to God.

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Green Theology is another way to say that we are all connected. Everything God has created is connected to everything else. We have understood for a long time now that humans have ancestries and DNA can show that we are connected to other parts of the world and ancient civilizations. But Green Theology goes further and says the one household plant – just like those on the altar today – is its own ecosystem – it gives and it receives, it grows and it dies, it enriches lives, makes clean air and sometimes provides food. We are connected to and reliant upon the flora and fauna of the earth. Yes, we are all connected.

Buddhism sees everything as interconnected. I once heard a Buddhist priest describe it as the “Buddhaverse” – that’s the oneness of the universe. Buddhists believe they are supposed to treat the earth as a piece of who we are. This has a strong resonance with our Christian virtue of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Being a good steward of the earth, then, isn’t just an ethic, it’s a spiritual mandate.

The same thing is true in Islam. Do you know what the word Muslim means? Muslim means anyone or anything that surrenders to the will of God. Imam Azeez at the Salam Center for the League of Associated Muslims explains that “the ocean is a Muslim, because the ocean surrenders to the will of God and does what God created it to do all the time. A tree is a Muslim, because a tree surrenders to the will of God and does what God created it to do all the time.”

In our Judeo-Christian ethics, we have the same spiritual mandate. We are made in the image of God at the beginning of all things. We have dominion over all of Creation according to Genesis. But having dominion doesn’t mean that we exploit Creation or that we manipulate it for our own purposes, because dominion means stewardship of, love for, care for. God has dominion over us. So, having dominion over the Creation that God has entrusted to our care means that just like God cares for us so that we might be the best we can be in this life, we are called to care for the earth so that it can be the best it can be. God said to Adam, “This is the last world I shall make. Hold it in your hands. I place it in trust.”

Every year the National Audubon Society sponsors several regional and national “bird count” days. This year, more than 210,000 participants from more than 140 countries submitted their bird observations over the four days of the count in February. This was the most detailed four-day snapshot of global bird populations ever undertaken. People reported 5,940 species, including 671 species in the United States. Some of the biggest trends had to do with birds staying and moving farther north than usual. Data showed that Tree Swallows are wintering as far north as Long Island and captured early northward movements of Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles throughout the US.

Anyone can participate and, obviously many do -- both professional ornithologists and backyard bird watchers observe, count, and identify the birds they see in their locale. Though not strictly a “scientific” survey, these “what’s-in-my-back-yard” observations help scientists to get an idea of what is happening with various bird populations. The shifts in population numbers, and the sightings of, or absence of, various species gives researchers an early “heads up” about the dynamics in bird populations and the possible environmental issues that might be affecting their success or stressing their survival.

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Bird-watchers, like “computer nerds,” used to be among the most maligned, the most targeted and teased, in the world of scientific research. Stereotyped as gawky social clods wearing ugly shorts, those funny pith helmets, wearing overstuffed vests with so many pockets, and peering through giant binoculars, serious bird watchers were the ultimate odd ones out. That is, until.

Until a bird watcher named Rachael Carson wrote an expose of an environmental disaster that was threatening our entire ecosystem. “Silent Spring,” published in 1962, revealed the extent to which the unregulated use of chemical pesticides was toxic to the ecosystem, decimating whole populations of wildlife, impacting air and water quality, and directly related to the rise in illnesses linked to chemical exposures in human populations. Since birds variously live in the air, water, and land, and their diets vary from eating insects, fruits, seeds, berries, worms and grubs, they were the perfect target populations to keep an eye on in order to keep track of these environmental threats.

Carson’s work eventually led to an executive order by President Richard Nixon creating the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). “Bird watchers” brought about the ban of DDT, which was killing the bald eagle, and helped get pesticides and poisons cleaned out of local landscapes and waterways throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

You see, plants are social creatures. What happens in one part of the ecosystem has a direct impact on other parts of the ecosystem.

Our gardens evolved as members of diverse social networks. Take a plant called the butterfly weed. This plant was named this year’s Perennial Plant of the Year by the gardening industry. It is fascinating to know that the height of its flower is exactly the height of the grasses it grows among. Its narrow leaves hug its stems to efficiently emerge through a crowded mix. It has a taproot that drills through the fibrous roots of grasses. Everything about that plant is a reaction to its social network. And it is these social networks that make plantings so resilient. The butterfly weed cannot survive without all of the other ecosystem around it. And, true to its name, it attracts butterflies and birds alike.

Bird watchers always have their eyes peeled for the rare or unusual, those species whose presence is either longed for or wholly unexpected. Hard-core “birders” have “life lists,” where they keep track of all the species they have personally seen over the years. The “rare birds,” those who only occur in certain areas and at certain times, are among the most coveted “life list” accomplishments. Everyone wants to “score” some really “rare bird.”

You may have never dangled on a pair of binoculars around your neck. You may not know the difference between a robin and a raven. But just by sitting here in church today you are definitely in the company of “rare birds.”

The Latin phrase for rare birds, “rara avis,” (rare – a – Avis) was one of the Reformation leader Martin Luther’s favorite titles for those who performed outside the norm of usual behavior, those who went above and beyond the obligation or duty. He called certain “princes” a “rara avis.” He called political leaders a “rara avis.” He called some senators and congress members of his day a “rara avis.” He called the average everyday people in the pews “rara avis” when they expressed their faith instead of their fears. These “rara avis” individuals were the unique “indicator species” in their communities and in

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their churches. Their health—or their decline—revealed much about the environment in which they were living.

Look at the person seated next to you, go ahead and turn to the person beside you and say to them: “You’re a ‘rara avis.’”

That almost feels good, doesn’t it? I think calling each of you a “rare bird” is so much nicer than telling you that you are all such odd ducks. Yet, there it is, you are an odd duck. I am an odd duck. But we are in good company.

In 1992, a shipping crate containing 28,000 plastic bath toys was lost at sea when it fell overboard on its way from Hong Kong to the United States. No one at the time could have guessed that those same bath toys would still be floating the world’s oceans nearly 25 years later, but they are.

There is a flotilla of plastic ducks – yes, yellow rubber duckies – cycling in a vortex of currents that stretch between Japan, southeast Alaska, Kodiak and the Aleutian Islands. While many of the 28,000 ducks were washed ashore from Hawaii to Alaska, from South America to Australia, from Newfoundland in the Atlantic to Scotland.

Scientists have studied this Great Pacific Ocean Garbage Patch which is now a massive island of floating debris, mostly plastic, that gets stirred by the currents into a pot of trashy soup. They have learned of the ocean current and the signs of climate change and they have tracked the damage to the sea and water supply to animals, birds and beaches from all of the chemical sludge and pieces of plastic that are not biodegradable.

These yellow rubber duckies have become the next bellwether sign of impending destruction of the earth. “Rara avis.” An odd duck.

Now I think that even Jesus was a pretty odd duck, don’t you?

Someone who believes in hope in the face of uncertainty? Someone who offers healing and reconciliation in the midst of suffering and brokenness? Someone who speaks truth to power and turns over the political establishment with a declaration that life is not about accumulating more and more things but is about who you are, what you do and how you are in relationship with your neighbor and even your neighbor earth.

That’s the responsibility that comes with being a rare bird; that’s the challenge of being an odd duck. What do you DO with that? How are you a bellwether for the future of the planet?

For we know all too well that if we are to lie down in green pastures, we had better do the work to protect the wilderness and ensure that pastures can flourish. If we are to walk beside still clean waters, we had better show some Christian love to the oceans and protect them against abuses. If we are to be shepherds as God is our shepherd, then our job is tend the gardens and care for the animals and all living creatures.

And if this is what it means to be an odd duck, then I am all in. Are you? Amen.