

"The Human Zoo"

Matthew 18:15-20

September 4, 2005

Consider two images as we enter into the message this morning. ***** First - the man who ended up in the hospital with a broken leg. It all started when the man who lived in Houston, Texas decided that he would bring in a hanging plant one evening because the evenings were getting quite cold. When he brought it in, the warmer temperature got the snake moving that had hidden in the pot. The snake slithered out into the living room and under the couch to the screams of the man's wife. The man, at this time, was in the shower and he came rushing out of the shower and into the living room. Dripping wet and naked, he leaned down to try to locate the snake under the couch. At the moment the family dog 'cold nosed' him from behind. Thinking it was the snake, the man fainted. The wife called the ambulance which arrived and loaded the man on a stretcher and they were lifting him at the moment the snake reappeared. At the sight of the snake the ambulance attendant dropped the stretcher and the man fell ... breaking his leg. *****

The London Zoo recently opened a new exhibit that was simply labeled "Humans". Near the entrance to the exhibit there was another sign that read, "Warning: Humans in their Natural Environment". Caged and barely clothed, three men and five women monkeyed around on a rock ledge in a bear enclosure. They were wearing swim suits and had pinned-on large, green fig leaves. Some played with hula hoops or balls, and some waved at the crowd that had gathered to see the newest zoo exhibit.

Visitors stopped to point and laugh, and several children could be heard asking, "Why are there people in there?" London Zoo spokeswoman Polly Wills says that's exactly the question the zoo wants to answer. "Seeing people in a different environment, among other animals ... teaches members of the public that the human is just another primate," Wills said.

When I read about this new zoo exhibit it really made me think. As far as science goes we would have to acknowledge that this zoo spokesperson is right - human beings are a part of the 'animals' kingdom. And I think that it is really a thought provoking notion to have some human beings caged right next to other zoo animals. Perhaps such an exhibit should push us to ask how we treat other animals. But for me, it seems to demand that I struggle with the question; "Are we really just another animal? Is there really anything that sets us apart from other animals?"

This week our hearts and minds have been drawn to the Gulf Coast. The devastation left in the wake of hurricane Katrina is beyond imagination. I am sure that all of our hearts

are drawn toward those who are suffering with such great losses. As I have listened to some of the reports on the situation there, I heard one reporter suggest that such events bring out both the best and worst in us. To watch reports of looting and anger, gunshots, rescue sabotage and price gouging is to see the worst in humanity come out. As I thought of these things I found myself thinking that maybe the zoo spokesperson was right - we are just another animal in the jungle when we are pushed into a survival mode. - - - Are we just animals or is there something that sets us apart?

Even though I have seen the pictures from the Gulf Coast I know that I simply can not conceive of the depth of the suffering and fear that they are enduring. I watch the reports and see so much that is not driven by our animal nature. A flood of relief is on the way. Individuals risk their own safety to rescue and care for others. Cities open their arms to receive the homeless no matter what the loss of revenue. And a world cries over the pain that has come to a part of the human family. - - - Is there something different about the human animal that would suggest that it does not belong in the zoo? - Yes!

Jesus is talking to His disciples in today's gospel text. They are talking about how to deal with problems that arise among people. They are not talking about the kind of situation that is playing out in the South but something much more individual. Still I believe that we can apply this word to so much in our world. When there is a problem - face it. Deal with it directly - one to one, if possible. If that does not work, bring in some friends. And if that is not enough, go to the whole church.

It is a great model that Jesus gives us in these words. The church has long used it as a model for conflict resolution and discipline within the church. But it is not just a good system for dealing with disagreements within the ranks of a congregation. It is a great model for dealing with life in all of its complexity. When there is a problem or a need, we help one another. When it is too much for those immediately involved, call in some help. And when the need is even greater, get all of God's people to help.

It is a nice model - I am not sure that our ability to reach out to one another in times of conflict or struggle is a factor that really separates us from the other animals in the zoo or not. But what strikes me in this text is the reason that we do these things - the guiding force that makes it possible to face and resolve the conflict or the problem. That guiding force is our God. ***"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them!"*** We are called to face conflict, guided not by the strong overpowering the weak but by the will of God. We face struggles not alone or even just in the presence of a community but with the force of Almighty God there to direct and empower us. It is to the presence of God that we turn for the strength and the will to reach out to one another instead of just being concerned with our own interests or rights.

Back to our first picture for a moment. It is a matter of perspective. If you are convinced that a snake is sneaking up behind you to do you harm, you might well react suddenly and violently. But if you knew it was man's best friend - if you knew that it was the one you spent countless time with and loved deeply, your reaction would be quiet different.

Are we just more animals in the zoo? No - sometimes we may act like wild beasts. We do in our personal relationships - we do it with fellow members of our community or even our church - we do it when we are filled with fear when hurricane winds blow and water surrounds our homes and we can see snakes all around us. It doesn't mean that we belong in the zoo.

As the people of God we have a great blessing. It is a blessing that calls us to deal with one another in great love and compassion. The blessing is the constant presence of the 'hound of heaven' [as one theologian referred to God]. When we are at odds with one person we are invited to go to that person knowing that God will be present - not a snake. When we experience struggles which seem beyond our ability to resolve - gather some others who might bring more of the insight and presence of God to bear on the situation. And when great disasters happen - call in the whole church - together, as we walk with a God who is present to us healing and wholeness can happen.

AMEN