

Kindness Revival

Why don't churches preach compassion for animals?



From the earliest days of the Puritans, the animal welfare movement in America, like so many other movements of liberation and social reform, was driven by people of faith.

But in our own time, mainstream religion has tended to ignore our fellow creatures.

In our continuing series about animals in religion, Best Friends executive director Paul Berry, who grew up in the evangelical Christian tradition, argues that it's time for the church to recapture the initiative and treat kindness to animals as one of the moral imperatives of our time.

► **By Paul Berry**

When I was four years old, I saw someone do the unthinkable – something so wrong that I blocked it from my memory until my brother reminded me about it years later.

We were at our house in New Orleans, playing under the carport with some puppies our dog had just had. She was a street dog, a sweet stray we'd named Skipper.

A man and a woman were arguing nearby.

Visibly angry, the man got in his car and sped down the driveway. My brother and I screamed, "Don't go yet! Don't go yet!" But the man was upset and mad, and he went anyway. He knowingly ran over three of the puppies.

That man was my father.

He was a troubled individual, and I've long since forgiven him.

But such displays of rage and violence are scattered throughout my childhood memories.

Thanks to my mother, I don't look back on my youth with any grief or sadness. She did a good job of making us kids feel safe and loved. A devout Christian woman, she introduced us to faith and prayer as a refuge for our struggling family. She upheld the life of Jesus as the ideal role model: courageous, kind and merciful. Nonviolent.

Mercy and nonviolence came naturally to us kids. My brother, sisters and I were always bringing home some lost pet or other. Seems we always had a house full of animals, and everyone was considered part of the family.

We were raised in the Southern Baptist tradition, and Sunday was reserved for church and family. If we missed going to church, Mom would make us all watch a church service on TV. Her favorite preachers were Oral Roberts and Robert Schuler. I liked Oral Roberts because he always began his service by saying, "Something good is going to happen to you." We all needed to hear that. But Robert Schuler was my favorite. With his booming voice and theatrical

“We’re all born with an innate sense of reverence for animals and nature that the church should be fostering.”

flair, he'd say audacious things like "Every problem is a possibility in disguise" and "Every person is a gold mine of hidden possibilities!" He was fun to watch, but he also had an empowering message of hope and personal transformation. And being my father's son, I needed to believe I could find goodness in myself.

With all the spiritual influences around me, I came to believe that you could create that goodness in yourself by doing good in the world – caring for all that God has given us: the animals, the Earth, and each other.

But I can't say church leaders helped shape my reverence and respect for animals and nature. That was personal.

Nature and nurture

Today, with kids of my own, I'm convinced that we're all born with an innate sense of reverence and responsibility for animals and the earth; kids just need reassurance from their parents and role models.

It's also clear that the concept of caring for all of nature is becoming more and more a concern for people all over the country, regardless of their faith or philosophy.

Last summer, when Best Friends commissioned a nationwide poll, we discovered that 89 percent of Americans agree that "we have a moral obligation to protect the animals in our care."

That's an astounding consensus. But how does it relate to people of faith?

In an informal survey of Best Friends members following the national poll, we asked them what their churches, temples and synagogues are talking about with respect to animals and morality, and how their religious leaders are teaching their congregations to act on those.

The answer: Beyond the human species – ourselves – God's creation is barely talked about at all.

So if this moral obligation toward our fellow creatures is such a core moral value for people, why isn't it upheld by our churches?

The evangelical movement prides itself on taking strong positions on moral issues. And congregations look to their churches for leadership. But the churches aren't setting much of an example on the subject of kindness to animals.

So is it any surprise that we're not seeing much follow-through from the congregations?

For myself, I long ago gave up even expecting to hear anything meaningful from the pulpit about the importance of protecting animals. And many people I used to go to church with and still meet up with occasionally tell me the same thing. We want our children to grow up in the church, but we want it to address all aspects of moral responsibility.

And if most of us are indeed born with an innate, God-given sense of moral responsibility, then surely it is the church's business to foster this responsibility and remind us of it into our adulthood. Instead, it all gets lost along the way.

Worse, many of our members told us, their churches have become so politically organized, so focused on narrow wedge issues, that they have pretty much lost sight of the big picture stuff – universal kindness, compassion, mercy and nonviolence.

So it should come as no surprise that when the churches start leaving their congregations, the congregations start leaving the churches. The *Washington Post* reported last summer that since 2000, more than 20 million Americans have left traditional churches to explore alternative venues of worship, including home churches, workplace ministries and online faith communities. And in early October, the *New York Times* reported that evangelical Christian leaders are warning one another that their teenagers are abandoning the faith in droves.

"Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these ..."

The founders of Christianity had a bold vision for a universal church built on the Golden Rule as spelled out in the Beatitudes. But with so much of its focus on issues that have more to do with Caesar than with God, much of the church that I grew up in has lost its sense of divine mission.

That mission should be to care for all creation: the animals, the Earth and each other. And if more Christians demanded that level of moral scope of their leaders, the church would be out in front on causes that relate to the animals and nature, ranging from environmental protection to animal welfare.

Just for starters, we should be demanding no-kill policies for homeless animals in our communities. And we should be fighting against the fur trade, factory farming and sport hunting, too. Those are profoundly immoral and sinful enterprises – meaning that they are about inflicting suffering and death upon God's creatures in pursuit of nothing more than human vanity, profit and entertainment.

But there's not nearly enough discussion in church on these issues, and certainly not enough encouragement to go out into society and campaign against such injustices.

People want to have those meaningful conversations. But in the follow-up to our national survey last year, we learned that most people of faith who are practicing compassion for animals are doing it in spite of the message they get from their religious institutions.

Reclaiming the agenda

In the last few years, many advances for animals have been made in the political arena. And much of that progress has been driven by the animal rights movement. As a result, Congress and local politicians are increasingly sensitive to the concerns of people who care about animals.

But meanwhile, the churches continue to treat concern for animals as a non-issue. Worse yet, the world of animal "rights" is often shunned by the evangelical movement as being "liberal" – even atheistic.

It may be true that some of the early adopters of the modern animal rights movement were non-religious – in some cases, even anti-religious. But much of that has to be seen in the light of the shocking lack of interest from the churches.

The truth is that the modern animal rights movement takes its inspiration from a great tradition of social reform that encompasses the history of this nation, from the Puritans to Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1641, for example, section 92 of the *Body of Liberties* adopted by the Massachusetts Bay Colony stated, "No man shall exercise any Tyranny or Crueltie towards any bruite Creature which are usuallie kept for man's use."

And in 1776, when the founding fathers of our country were engaged in declaring that "all men are ... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," the Anglican minister Rev. Humphrey Primatt published his *Dissertation on the Duty of Mercy and the Sin of Cruelty to Brute Animals*, in which he wrote:

"Pain is pain, whether it is inflicted on man or on beast; and the creature that suffers it, whether man or beast, being sensible of the misery of it whilst it lasts, suffers Evil ...

"We may pretend to what religion we please, but cruelty is atheism.

"We may boast of Christianity, but cruelty is infidelity.

"We may trust our orthodoxy, but cruelty is the worst of heresies."

Certainly, in our own time, there are voices in a comparative wilderness, speaking out for kindness to animals from a faith-based perspective. One who captured the public attention in 2002 was Matthew Scully, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, who left the White House to write *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*. A practicing Catholic, Scully says that "It is usually best in any moral inquiry to start with the original motivation, which in the case of animals we may without embarrassment call love."

More than ever, it's time for people of faith to take ownership of the animal cause – if not necessarily as an issue of "rights," then certainly as one of core spiritual values: kindness, compassion, mercy, nonviolence and love.

For many of us, it is easier to promote rational arguments for animal justice. But, in the final analysis, our motivation is about something entirely irrational: love. We love them as our family, and they love us back unconditionally.

Is there any cause more noble for the Christian than to honor the blessing of love in this life? ♣

You can join the continuing discussion at network.bestfriends.org/religion.

Next time: A Jewish perspective on caring for animals and nature.



How You Can Promote Kindness to Animals in Your Church

- Bring the issue to your pastor, your Sunday school class, or your Bible study group, and start the conversation about how wide the circle of compassion should be.
- Ask questions like these: Who are the keepers of compassion and justice and morality? What examples should we be giving in our own lives with respect to animals and the natural world? And where should we be guiding the rest of society?

Questions lead to answers. Answers lead to actions. Imagine a group of local pastors showing up at a city council meeting to demand a no-kill plan for their city shelter. Now imagine a whole convention of thousands of pastors and church leaders from all over the country working together to protest the treatment of animals at factory farms, vivisection laboratories, puppy mills and sporting events.

- If you're a pastor, talk to your congregation about your concern for animals. You are not alone. Best Friends can put you in touch with other ministers who share your beliefs, and with resources, including sermons, that have been preached here at home and in other countries. If you've preached on the subject yourself, please send us a copy of your sermon to share with others.
- Raise the subject of your congregation coming together to demand environmental justice from polluters. Or youth groups cleaning up lakes and streams and restoring wildlife habitats as part of their youth outreach.

How would these efforts affect church attendance on Sunday? If local churches were to create real opportunities for Christians to do meaningful work for animals, it could inspire a revival of "biblical" proportions.

Let us know how you feel and add your name to the list of those of us who want their church to take a leading role in the discussion of animal welfare. Join us at network.bestfriends.org/religion to continue the discussion. We'll share your thoughts with church leaders and report on the results in an upcoming issue of *Best Friends* magazine.