

THE GOD OF ANIMALS, PART VI: BARNYARD RELIGION
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—DEUTERONOMY 25:4
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Christian churches do not often consult the book of Deuteronomy these days, perhaps because its long center section is a curious miscellany of obscure rules and regulations that don't have much to do with life as we live it today. For example, I can't remember the last time I was tempted to muzzle my ox while he was treading my grain. But perhaps we should consult it more often, because it is one of the most important books in the Hebrew Bible. One scholar claimed that Judaism as we know it today is a product of the Book of Deuteronomy.¹ For all practical purposes, Deuteronomy is the Jewish Constitution.

Deuteronomy taught the Jews what it means to be holy before the Lord, and when you read the Book of Deuteronomy, you discover that to a large extent what it means to be holy before the Lord is to show compassion to the vulnerable, the defenseless, and the voiceless. In its comprehensive egalitarianism and inclusive humanity to those who cannot speak out for themselves, Deuteronomy is way, way, way ahead of its time. In the annals of global law-making, there will be nothing as humane or progressive for centuries to come.

¹Leslie J. Hoppe, in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), p. 343.

Certain words pop up with unexpected frequency in Deuteronomy: widows, orphans, strangers, aliens, even oxen and donkeys—the weak, the forgotten, the left-behind, the disenfranchised, the speechless. If the authors of Deuteronomy were living in Connecticut in 2008, they would have added another law to their legal code: When a hit-and-run driver picks off an old guy in the middle of Hartford, Connecticut, you shall not pass by pretending you do not see.” Widows, orphans, accident victims have a special—even an extraordinary, an all-eclipsing—claim on our humanity.

Unaccountably, this mandate applies even to the unhuman, even to the dumb animals. In this sense, Deuteronomy is way ahead of its time. The first SPCA wouldn't appear until 1824, created in England by several Ministers of Parliament, including William Wilberforce, who also ended the slave trade in British territories.

For most of human history, animals were simply unfeeling objects. Thomas Aquinas said animals were for human use, and we could do with them what we wanted.² The English word 'cattle,' for instance, comes from the Latin word *capita*, which means

²Cited in a sermon by Jonathan Massey, *God Is Concerned About the Oxen, Paul!*, in *Best Sermons*, vol. 5, ed. James W. Cox (Harper San Francisco, 1992), p. 184.

'heads,' so that the phrase 'head of cattle' is a redundancy. The words 'chattel' and 'capital' come from the same place. Capital is property, of course, so cattle are simply 'moveable property.' Descartes thought of animals as 'complex automata' without mind, soul, or consciousness. They felt no pain when they were beaten or injured, and no pleasure when they ate. Clearly Descartes did not have a dog or he would have known that animals experience intense pleasure when they eat.

And so Deuteronomy is way ahead of its time in looking after the interests of animals. Did you know that donkeys and oxen appear in the Ten Commandments? The fifth Commandment: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is holy unto the Lord. You shall do no work, you or your son or your daughter, or your man-servant, or your maid-servant, or your ox or your donkey." The Sabbath, you see, is the day when former slaves remember that they are slaves no longer, and take one day off a week, just to prove that they *can*, and to worship the Lord, and on the seventh day even animals should not be treated slavishly.

You probably knew this, but I didn't (it's funny how little I know at the age of 50 about the common details of life). You probably knew that oxen are just cattle; it's the same animal. Oxen are simply the kind of cattle that plow the fields and thresh the grain. Most oxen are bulls because bulls are bigger and stronger than cows, and most oxen are neutered because it makes them more docile. It takes years to train a beast to plow the fields and thresh the grain efficiently. So an ox is just a steer with an education.

In days of old they'd pull a wooden roller studded with nubs of iron across the harvested

grain to separate the ears from the stalk, and since the oxen worked so hard for your daily bread it just seemed fair to the bleeding-heart liberal who wrote Deuteronomy to let them share the calories while they were doing the work. Muzzling the ox during threshing just seemed inhumane, un-Sabbath-like, un-Jewish, unholy. Long before the first SPCA, Deuteronomy offered us a Theology for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, got this right, even if many Christians like Aquinas and Descartes didn't. Gandhi called the cow "a poem of pity." The cow is a poem of pity, and defense of the animals is all the more important because they are speechless.

Kindness to animals sometimes doesn't mean a whole lot, of course. You can adore your precious chihuahua and still be mean as a snake to all bipeds. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they passed the most comprehensive animal protection laws in Europe. They took away the human beings sacrosanct privilege and placed all living beings in a pecking order of relative value. Aryans were at the top, of course, followed by wolves, eagles and pigs. Jews and rats were at the bottom. Out of respect for their four-footed friends, Hitler, Hess, Himmler and Goebbels were all vegetarians.

Still, this ancient, bleeding-heart liberal Book of Deuteronomy teaches us something absolutely essential about our own humanity—even three thousand years later. Deuteronomy gets its point across with the relentless monotony of a CD player with a stuck laser beam, or an ipod on the fritz. Widows, orphans, and the defenseless have an extraordinary claim upon your humanity. Why? I'm glad you asked because Deuteronomy is not bashful about answering that question—over and over and

over again. It's because of the long, deep, entrenched, inescapable collective memory of the history of the Jews as a people of God. It's because not long ago and not far away, Deuteronomy tells its Jewish constituents, you were defenseless and voiceless too, and you can never forget that.

"A wandering Aramean was my father," Deuteronomy reminds the Jews. "He went down into Egypt an alien and came out an exploited slave." "I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Jewish compassion for the defenseless derives from and is anchored fast to the Jews' own recent experience of vulnerability. When they arrived in Egypt, they were defenseless aliens, and when they left they were slaves, and when they wandered for forty years between slavery in Egypt and promise in Canaan, they were homeless derelicts, and you should never forget what that is like.

That's such an important lesson to remember about our own humanity. Isn't it your own vulnerability that teaches you compassion, and isn't it suffering that teaches us sympathy? Do you want a dentist drilling in your mouth if he doesn't know how much it hurts? Do you want an oncologist coaching you through your cancer therapy if she's never been scared to death herself? If you're young and small and lost in the mall, do you want a father who was never himself young and small and lost in the mall tracking you down at the end of the weepy ordeal? When your marriage is in trouble, do you want a therapist who's never struggled terribly and almost failed at her own? When some burly sixth-grader corners you on the playground with a bristling ice-ball, do you confide in a friend who's never been bullied himself? When you're standing

there next to a pile of turned earth at the lip of a fresh grave, do you want a pastor who's never had a broken heart?

Can we see our own experiences of vulnerability and voicelessness and sadness and suffering as undercover gifts from the God who wants to make us human and humane? One of Jewish novelist Philip Roth's protagonists remembers the day he became a man. "It was the first time I saw my father cry. A childhood milestone, when another's tears are more unbearable than your own."³

Deuteronomy reminds us that we become mature, we become human, we become the holy people of God, when another's tears are more unbearable than our own, and I might even suggest that *IF* another's tears become more unbearable than your own, is it possible that it is God speaking to you through this experience?

That's how Barbara Brown Taylor heard the voice of God. Barbara Brown Taylor is 50-something, six feet tall, gorgeous, Episcopalian, and one of the greatest preachers in America just now. She says that when she was little, she could not walk past an injured creature without rescuing it, and that that was the beginning of her call to the ministry. She says that the number of graves in her backyard never deterred her from picking up the next orphan or cripple. Instead of collecting stamps, she collected wounded animals. "I was much happier with a hurt bird than I was with most people," she says, "because the bird seemed happier to see me. Sitting quietly together, we both got better. We understood each other, and in the inexplicable alchemy of

³Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), p. 113.

compassion, my care for the bird gave real comfort to me.” I love the way she puts that: the inexplicable alchemy of compassion.

The Reverend Taylor says most clergy are like that: they have this soft spot for hurt things. Maybe most doctors too, and veterinarians, and therapists, and social workers. The call to serve doesn’t come straight from God, but from a sick sibling or a wounded bird. “In my case,” she says, “the priesthood came as natural as breathing, as simple as picking up a hurt thing and taking it home either to heal or to bury.”⁴

Forty years ago today, Ted Kennedy eulogized his brother Bobby with words it might be good for us to carry home with us today: “We needn’t make him any larger in death than he was in life: just a good and decent man who saw wrong and tried to right it, suffering and tried to heal it, war and tried to end it.”

That’s what our memory of our sad experiences might do for us. That is what is religion is for. Abraham Lincoln said, “I care not for a man’s religion if his dog and cat are not the better for it.”⁵ What about your neighbor? What about the starving on the other side of the world? Are the vulnerable and the voiceless any better off because of your faith? Otherwise, what’s the point?

⁴Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (Harper San Francisco, 2006), pp. 25-27.

⁵Quoted by James Taylor in *The Spirituality of Pets* (Kelowna, BC, Canada: Northstone, an imprint of Wood Lake Publishing, Inc., 2006), p. 66.