

Margaret B. Adam's Sarx Creature Conference Talk, March 2017

Why should Christians care about animals?

Answers abound: because animals suffer from human cruelty; because animals are sentient, feeling creatures; because from creation God calls upon humans to exercise responsibility for animals; because animals are creatures in their own right and not for humans to use; because contemporary factory farming abuses animals in ways previously unimaginable. David Clough spoke this morning about drawing connections between Christians and animals. I'd like to continue in that vein, with some considerations about what's *Christian* about Christian animal advocacy.

Christians should care about animals, *because of who and how Christians are called to be.*

1. **Christians are members of the body of Christ.** The primary identity of a Christian is a body-member, interconnected with all the other body members, incorporated into the body of Jesus Christ. This means that we are both human bodies like this, tangled up with each other in Christ, AND, somehow, not-yet-resurrected bodies, waiting for the reconciliation of all creation, in the resurrected and ascended body of Christ. As embodied humans, now we are limited by brokenness, confined by finitude, and constrained by systemic sin. As humans embodied in Christ's body, through Christ's body, we hope to be resurrected bodies in the salvation of the world. We hope to be fully-human in the presence of God, and abiding peaceably with all creatures. Christians claim to be citizens of both worlds: these bodies, in the body that is the church; and resurrected bodies, reconciled to each other and the cosmos.

Christians, in and as the body of Christ, are most fully Christians when the citizenship we know now turns toward the citizenship of reconciliation-to-come, when this citizenship reflects citizenship in the peaceable kingdom as much as possible, now.

If we only claim citizenship in this world, then we could plausibly focus only on what seems realistic, practical, economically productive: violence is sometimes necessary, factory farming is effective, animal suffering can't be avoided, animals--like humans--are going to die anyway. If we understand ourselves to be completely bound by limited resources and death, we might assume that our reliance on animals for food and comfort is the only option.

But, this is not our only citizenship. Violence, scarcity, and death do not have the last word. Our bodies are not primarily governed by conflict with the rest of creation. Christians should care about animals, because *through the resurrected body of Christ*, we are also citizens in the peaceable kingdom, in which humans and animals and all of creation flourish.

2. **Christians should care about animals, because we don't have to make a difference.** Animal advocacy may seem ineffective. It might not change the world. It might not make a visible impact on the lives of very many animals. It is an unprofitable enterprise. In other words, animal advocacy fits the pattern of Christian discipleship perfectly.

Christians don't have to determine what to do and how to do it based on making a difference in the world, because Jesus Christ makes *the* difference. It's not our job to bring about the

redemption of the world. Our job is to share glimpses of the difference Christ makes. Our job is to demonstrate the radically impractical conviction that one lamb's rescue is worth any cost.

Missionaries continue their work of faithful presence and service even if there are no converts for years and years. Quiet acts of charity and ministry remain faithful responses to Christ's love, even without an quantitative assessment. At present, factory farming ruins the lives of countless animals by treating them as mere products for consumption. We can and should try to persuade multinational corporations to change their policies. In the meantime, immoderate showers of comfort for afflicted creatures can witness to the divinely limitless love and comfort that perseveres beyond death. Christians can share glimpses of life freed from death, with a non-strategic, extravagant, implausible passion for the quality of life of even just one of the least of God's creatures.

If Jesus Christ disempowers death with persevering love, if our primary citizenship is the body of Christ that perseveres despite death, then that resurrection citizenship should shape who we are now and direct what we do today--whether or not our efforts seem to make a difference.

Christians reach out to the needy our job is to reflect the promise of heaven in how we live on earth.

Do we believe that Christ's reconciliation of the cosmos is greater than the financial practicalities of mass producing hamburgers? If we do, then we can choose a bean burger over a beef burger as a reflection of that belief even if we can't demonstrate that one bean burger will transform industrial factory farming.

Christians should care about animals, because the body of Christ should behave as if the peaceable kingdom is real. Get to know a chicken. Find out where a pig likes to be scratched. Don't step on that snail. Love them. They are groaning with us, with all of creation, for Christ's reconciliation.

3. **Christians should care about animals, because we aim to be of one mind with other Christians.** Some Christians provide faithful, persuasive examples of discipleship that we have not taken on ourselves. We should not dismiss them as another sort of Christians, as if it makes sense for there to be Christians for Animals, Christians for Economic Justice, Christians for Refugees, and Christians for Normal Stuff. We are all for Christ. As one body, we can learn from those who know a lot about animal flourishing and animal abuse. They can show us how to reflect persevering love in animal advocacy. No one individual can be an expert in all manifestations of love, anymore than one individual can be all parts of the body. But, we can support and cooperate with each other. We can be the church that together ministers to the world's needy now AND witnesses to the world beyond pain and death yet to come. We can claim primary allegiance to Christ, together, AND learn to increase charity and compassion for animals now.

In our efforts to be of one mind with Christ and with those who comprise the body of Christ, we are called to listen to and learn from other members of the body about how they live their lives turned toward the kingdom of heaven. **Christians should care about animals because we are striving to be of one mind with other members of Christ's body**, and--right this minute--some of those members are pretty persuasive about extending mercy and love to animals.

4. **Christians should care about animals because so much of what we do as Christians already involves and makes space for animal care.**

As Christians, we gather together for **worship**.

Usually, we **dress** before we gather. We discern how much of our wardrobe is made through the suffering and death of animals.

We often **eat** before we leave for church, and we often eat at church gatherings. We discern which foods to purchase and prepare. Food made from animals? Food made from animals who have never been allowed to flourish? Food made from plants?

When we gather for worship, we **praise** God. We learn about God through God's creation. [[[Job 12: 7-10]]] The animals teach us, the birds in the sky tell us, the fish in the sea inform us what the LORD does (Job 12:7-11). We praise God *with* sea monsters and fish, wild animals and domesticated animals, creeping animals and flying birds (Ps 148). We learn about how to praise God in part from the example of animals whose flourishing itself *is* praise. We should probably learn more about those animals who cannot flourish because they are abused for human consumption.

Together in worship, we **pray** for those in need. If we are attentive, we are always learning about the needs of others, people and animals. Now we are learning more and more about how humans mutilate, torture, and mass-produce animals for profit. So many animals to pray for--is there really enough time to pray for people AND animals, in the allotted time for corporate, intercessory prayer. Fortunately, we are called to pray without ceasing--or at least, to pray a bit more, together and on our own. We know that God will not be overwhelmed the volume of prayers. And if we don't pray for animals, we act as if God's love and power only covers humans.

In worship, we **confess** our sins together. After praising with animals and praying for their protection, we ask forgiveness for our own hurtful actions and inactions. We ask forgiveness for the ways that our lives have not reflected the hope of redemption for the world.

In **petitions**, we pray for strength and for divine assistance to re-turn toward salvation, to re-direct our energies from selfish greed to charitable compassion for those in need--because we know that Christ reconciles the world.

At the **eucharist**, we receive the body and blood of Christ--the flesh of Jesus Christ in the form of food from plants, not animals--that renews our Christ's-body identity. We die with Christ and Christ draws us toward the renewed creation which is not defined by death and consumption.

Then, we **go forth** rejoicing. This might be the most difficult of all--to walk as we have worshipped, to praise with animals, to care for animals, to do the things we ought to have done, to take on the strength we've requested, and to be transformed. But, we don't do it alone. We go forth in the company of the church body, and we hold each other accountable to the identity we claim in Christ.

Christians should care for animals, because we are members of Christ's living, dying, resurrected body, bound for the peaceable kingdom of reconciled creation.