



Neighbors, Neighbor-Love, and Our Animal Neighbors

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In this article, I argue two main points. First, Christians are called to have a very specific, unequivocal relationship with their neighbors: they are called to love them. However, in a Christian context, “love” has little to do with warm feelings and affection. Instead, Christian love points to the necessity of action—works of justice, compassion, and mercy that support the preservation and the flourishing of one’s neighbor. Second, the concept of “neighbor,” and therefore the Christian call to love the neighbor, extends beyond our human neighbors and into the non-human animal kingdom. Thus, caring for, promoting, and protecting the well-being of animals as Christian neighbors is something essential to one’s life as a Christian, and a core practice of Christian love.

“WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?”

While there are many stories in the Gospels that might be considered paradigmatic “neighbor-love” stories, surely one of the most important in this category—if not *the* most important—is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells the parable, remember, in response to the question asked by a lawyer: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” After a bit of back-and-forth, the answer is clear: “Love

Defining the Christian duty to those around them as “neighbor-love,” Kristin Johnston Largent understands this as the necessity of taking actions to work for those around us. She then suggests that this concept of “neighbor-love,” with its imperative to action, must also be expanded to the animals with which we share the world, and who are suffering from exploitation.

God and love your neighbor.” This would seem to be fairly straightforward, but you know lawyers—so, a further clarification is demanded: “And who is my neighbor?” The parable is told as a response to that specific question.

At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus turns back to the lawyer and says, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer responds correctly: somewhat surprisingly, the neighbor proved to be the Samaritan who interrupted his travels to bind the man’s wounds, rather than the priest or the Levite, both of whom crossed the street to avoid him. Jesus then says, “Go and do likewise.” Often what is emphasized in this parable is the insider/outsider dynamic of Samaritans and Jews, or the indifference of the two religious authorities to one in need. However, in this context, I want to highlight one specific aspect of the story, which underscores its primary point, and that is the actual definition of “love.”

Often what is emphasized in this parable is the insider/outsider dynamic of Samaritans and Jews. I want to highlight one specific aspect of the story, which underscores its primary point, and that is the actual definition of “love.”

In a twenty-first-century popular context, typically when we use the word “love,” we are pointing to a feeling, an emotional response. To say that I love someone means that I like spending time with her, I am attracted to her, and/or she is dear to me. Love, then, is a feeling of affection that usually is inspired either by the positive qualities of another person that draw me to him, or by a familial relationship that engenders my warmth and affection. Jesus is explicit, however, that the foundation of Christian love is neither the attributes of the other person nor his or her family/clan relationship to me. Instead, Jesus makes clear that Christian love is something else entirely.

First and foremost, Jesus emphasizes that Christians are called to love beyond the bonds of blood and affection; Christians are called to love the stranger and the enemy. This is one of the key characteristics of Jesus’s own ministry, and therefore this is what characterizes Christian love as well: it seeks out and embraces the unlovable, the unloved, the unfortunate, the unhappy. In this way, Christian love mirrors God’s love for humanity, as Luther describes it in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 28: “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of [humans] comes into being through attraction to what pleases it.”¹ Second, Christian love is not focused on one’s personal feelings of affection, as though the call to love is satisfied by the favorable disposition of my heart or my mind toward another. Instead, Christian love is focused on action that is motivated by compassion for the other—by the need of the other, and by the desire for

¹Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 112.

the flourishing of the other. In this way, too, Christian love mirrors God's compassion for the cosmos, which motivated God's own salvific self-emptying and incarnation.

This shift in focus of what it means to "love" the neighbor comes to Christians as a freeing and empowering gift. Imagine how difficult it would be if Christians were called not to *love* their neighbors, but to *like* them: that is, imagine if Jesus called us not to acts of justice and compassion, but feelings of warmth and affection. This would be much more difficult, if not impossible. But, to be clear, Christians are not called to "like" anyone: we do not have to pretend to have admiration or fondness for those with radically different political views than we, those who come from different backgrounds, or practice different religious traditions.

Of course, make no mistake, this is no excuse to *dislike* someone, either; and certainly, warm feelings often do result from acts of love; when people of different circumstances come together to work together for the same end, and when they get to know each other in fresh ways, they can form surprising friendships from which genuine affection results. Indeed, this is to be commended and even desired; and, I would argue, this affection is one of the fruits of the Spirit that comes from Christian love in action. However—and this is the point—such affection is not *required* as a precondition for Christian love: love in action precedes love in emotion.

WHY ANIMALS?

It perhaps is not self-evident that the concept of the "neighbor" stretches beyond the bounds of the human family. However, the question can be turned around with equal force: it is not self-evident that the concept of the neighbor does *not* stretch beyond the bounds of the human family—and indeed, the burden of proof rests on those who wish to constrict Jesus's vision of neighbor-love. I argue two primary reasons for including animals (and indeed, the whole created universe) in the category of neighbor: first, because God created animals and called them "good" before humans were ever on the scene; and second, because humans are deeply embedded relationally in the larger web of life, and human existence is bound up with the existence of other nonhuman animals in profound and critical ways.

To the first point: God loves animals just for who they are, not simply because they serve an instrumental purpose for humankind. Indeed, in the original vision of the Garden of Eden, humans and animals were all vegetarian; there was no predation, as humans were given plants yielding seed as food, and animals were given green plants for food (Gen 1). Animals were created first, and called "good" by God before they ever were harnessed by human beings for work or food. Therefore, if God loves them just as they are, Christians are called to love them, too.

To the second point: human existence is embedded in the same web of life that nurtures and supports animal existence, and human flourishing is not independent from animal flourishing. Protecting animals from pollution, deforesta-

tion, global warming, toxic water, and overpopulation are all expressions of Christian love that also seeks the good of the human neighbor. And, protecting animals from abusive relationship with humans—whether that be individual exploitative relationships that humans have with animals (Michael Vick and dogfighting comes to mind here, as well as the captivity of orcas by SeaWorld, which led to the tragic death of a trainer in 2010), or abuse that occurs on a larger scale, such as factory farming and animal testing—freeing animals from those relationships also means freeing humans as well, and creating the possibility of new ways of being together for all involved.

What, then, does this neighbor-love look like in practice? Jesus himself provides the answer. Jesus said, “I came that they might have life and life abundant” (John 10:10). Christian love is motivated by that vision of Jesus Christ, and it always seeks the flourishing of life for the neighbor—that is, the outsider and the stranger—and it is embodied and experienced through two primary practices: seeing, and acting.

TO SEE

The first stage in neighbor-love is observation and attention: it is impossible to love anyone—that is, to act on her behalf and for her flourishing—if you don’t even see her. This “seeing” is a central component of Jesus’ healing ministry. Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus notices people others overlook, he stops to engage people others encourage him to pass by, and he seeks out people others avoid and shun. And in seeing them, in really seeing each one of them for who they are—the woman with the alabaster jar (Luke 7:36–50), the hemorrhaging woman (Luke 8:43–48), the Samaritan woman (John 4:2–26), and Nathanael (John 1:43–51)—they are transformed and receive the gift of new life. So, too, for Christians today; this happens regularly and perhaps most often with people, but this kind of seeing is not restricted to other human beings.

Martin Buber uses an interesting example in his book *I and Thou*. The main argument of the book is that there are two types of relationships that are always before us, two “words” that we can speak, two alternative “word pairs” that create the world in which we live. Those pairs are “I/Thou” and “I/It,” and Buber is clear about the word pair that must define us, the only word pair that actually allows us to realize our full humanity—“I/Thou.” It is only with this orientation to the entire world that we are able to fully “be,” to relate to the world and to experience the world in authentic, constructive ways. Furthermore, Buber is clear that this subject/subject relationship is not confined exclusively to people, but instead, it should characterize our way of relating to all beings.

As his first example of this relationship, he describes his contemplation of a tree. He first begins with all the ways he can regard a tree and observe its different characteristics, but throughout, the tree continues to remain an object for one’s study and scrutiny. However, there is another possibility: “But it can also happen,

if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It.”² For Buber, only in this relationship is true life, only in this relationship is true humanity, and only in this relationship is the experience of the living God.³ In this argument, Buber makes clear that to be fully human calls for seeing even nonhuman living beings as subjects in a dynamic relationship, rather than as objects to be observed and controlled.

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Sallie McFague emphasizes the same point using a different metaphor. In her book *Super, Natural Christians* she describes the difference between the “loving eye” and the “arrogant eye.” She first argues that “the Western way of knowing is based primarily on one of our faculties—the eye. We do not smell, taste, touch, or even hear our way to knowledge of the world. We see our way.”⁴ However, there is not simply one way of seeing. Instead, she contrasts two different ways of viewing the world, and when it comes to animals, the place she begins is with the zoo.

Many animal lovers have an ambivalent relationship with zoos. For many people, they learned to love animals by seeing them in zoos for the first time as children—amazing animals like tigers, elephants, and giraffes that they had only read about in books. However, what most children were not able to see was how captivity damaged these animals profoundly, and how the cages in which they were housed were not designed primarily for the comfort, well-being, and nurture of the animals, but for the sake of the viewing public. Only as adults did these uncomfortable truths reveal themselves to us, showing us that what we thought was affection was fueled instead by arrogance. Sallie McFague does not mince words here. She writes, “Zoos collect animals, especially exotic ones from faraway places, as spectacles for human viewing.”⁵ And, in so doing, they are objectified, an act which diminishes them as well as us.

An aspect of her argument is particularly relevant in this context, and, one could argue, even more relevant than when she wrote it twenty years ago. Related to the “arrogant eye” is the eye of the camera, and what she calls “scopophilia.” The term is Freud's, and it refers to “subjecting other people to a curious, controlling gaze, seeing them as objects.”⁶ While certainly there are ways in which the camera can deepen and enhance our way of seeing the world, few would argue that all too often the camera creates a barrier between the viewer and the viewed, which leads

²Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970) 58.

³Ibid., 126–128.

⁴Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 67.

⁵Ibid., 81.

⁶Ibid., 84.

to “distancing, objectifying, and controlling the world through vision; we are now in danger of losing it as we substitute pictures for the real thing.”⁷ Now that every phone is a camera, with multiple filters and editing features, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are even closer to the “extinction of experience” that McFague describes, where instead of seeking encounters outside with animals “face to face,” as it were, we instead seek first and foremost to photograph them; or, even more, stay inside entirely and watch videos on the computer or programs on the television, which are heavily edited to maximize viewer enjoyment.

What McFague suggests in place of the arrogant eye is the “loving eye.” In the context of an argument where she privileges touch over sight (and also quotes Martin Buber), she writes that the loving eye has two primary characteristics: “an appreciation of the difference and particularity of others as well as an empathetic connection with them.”⁸ It requires taking time, taking effort, and opening oneself up to the reality of the other—letting oneself go, in a sense, to be with the other; it requires “a willingness to be surprised.”⁹ Here, I can’t help but think of Jesus’s encounter with the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7—not only does Jesus take the time to “see” her, talk to her and engage her, he also listens to her, and in so doing is “surprised” by her, changing his mind about his mission as it relates to the Gentiles.

The point here, then, is that a Christian cannot love without first seeing.

TO ACT

Once one really “sees” the neighbor, what then? Naturally, then, one is called to act, to do something; and this is the pattern we see over and over in Jesus’s own ministry. However, of all the examples we might lift up here, I want to direct our attention to the healing miracles he performed on the Sabbath in particular.

One could legitimately ask why Jesus almost seemed to go out of his way to violate the Sabbath laws, which certainly he knew would antagonize the Jewish leaders of his day. Surely it would have been less confrontational to confine his healings to the other six days of the week, and leave the Sabbath alone. Why did he so explicitly and repeatedly challenge the Jewish Sabbath practice of “rest” by performing “work”? I argue that, in Jesus’s context, the Sabbath was a holy time set apart for the Jewish community to worship God and to renew kinship bonds of family. It was the centerpiece of Jewish law and a central practice for the Jewish people. There was, however, little if any place for outsiders, for strangers. Jesus, then, wanted to redefine what it meant to “keep the Sabbath” in such a way as to make radical neighbor-love (and through such love, love of God) the center of Sabbath practice.

Now for some examples. All three synoptic Gospels tell the story of Jesus

⁷Ibid., 83.

⁸Ibid., 113.

⁹Ibid., 111.

healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, with the justification that “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” (In this example, Jesus also makes clear that if anyone has a sheep who falls into a pit, that sheep should be pulled out for the same reason.) In Luke 13:10–17, we read how Jesus cured a woman who had been suffering in the grip of a crippling spirit for eighteen years. Again, he is challenged and again he uses an example of the care and responsibility humans have for animals—in this case watering oxen and donkeys—to justify his healing actions. Immediately following this, in Luke 14:1–6, he heals a man with dropsy using the same rationale—if someone has a child (or donkey in some sources) or an ox who falls into a well on the Sabbath, who would not pull it out? Finally, in John 5:1–14, Jesus heals a man who had been sick thirty-eight years, enabling him to walk; and in this case, John records that it is these very healings that initiate the religious persecution against Jesus.

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As I noted previously, Jesus himself makes clear the point of his actions: the Sabbath is made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. His point here is that the Sabbath is meant to nurture one’s relationship with God and with one’s neighbor: it is holy insofar as it serves this purpose, not because it is something to be worshipped in and of itself, like an idol. This is true also for the law, the great gift of God to the Israelites that helped them identify themselves as God’s people and facilitated their right worship of God. In this way, the law is a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. And, in Jesus’s view, this “end” includes right relationships with other people, and therefore the Sabbath laws can and should be violated when following them would imperil the care and well-being of one’s neighbor.

The Christian practice of neighbor-love, then, calls us into action, calls us into embodied solidarity with those who are the neediest among us, with those who most desperately need the designation “neighbor.” And, in the twenty-first-century context in which we live today, in which global warming and climate change are real, pressing problems that have the potential to decimate human and animal populations alike, this call goes beyond our human neighbors and into the animal kingdom.

One does not need to look very far to find evidence of the looming catastrophe that is facing a wide swath of species populating every corner of the animal kingdom. For example, a recent *New York Times* article reports that the population of African elephants has dropped thirty percent in the last seven years, primarily due to poaching.¹⁰ This rate of loss is unsustainable. The National Wildlife Federa-

¹⁰Niraj Chokshi and Jeffrey Gettleman, “African Elephant Population Dropped 30 Percent in 7 Years,” *New*

tion estimates that two-thirds of the polar bear population will have vanished by 2050 due to global warming and accelerated Arctic ice melt.¹¹ Finally, according to one website that focuses on amphibian research, “We have now moved into the phase of amphibian extinctions rather than studying amphibian declines and 43% of all amphibians are threatened with extinction.”¹²

In the face of such overwhelming loss and destruction, it is easy to feel paralyzed. What can I do to save the rhinoceroses, or the sharks? How can I help the river dolphins, or the gorillas?

This is not a localized problem. The World Wildlife Federation and many other organizations keep statistics on the illegal wildlife trade, and by any measure the scope of the crisis is massive. Animals are trafficked for a variety of reasons: to be kept as exotic pets, to be eaten, or for the various parts of their bodies that are believed to have medicinal properties. Some people just want the head of an endangered animal to hang on their wall. It’s a multibillion-dollar industry that involves transnational criminal networks, government loopholes, and a colossal cost to ecosystems all around the world—to say nothing of species from rhinos to parrots. In fact, many argue that we are now in the middle of what is called the “sixth extinction”—the fifth one took the dinosaurs—an accelerated period of species loss resulting from human exploitation, neglect, malfeasance, and disregard.¹³ Viewed together, in its totality, one might even call it evil.

In the face of such overwhelming loss and destruction, it is easy to feel paralyzed. What can I do to save the rhinoceroses, or the sharks? How can I help the river dolphins, or the gorillas? The point of this article is not to specifically commend any one action, but rather to argue that some action, any action is incumbent upon Christians as a component of the neighbor-love to which we all are called—action somehow, in some way, in whatever form makes the most sense for you in your context. Certainly we know there are many things an individual can do that require only a little effort. Going vegetarian one day a week, riding a bike or walking instead of taking the car for a nearby errand, choosing to eschew fur or leather, eating only sustainably farmed fish, volunteering at an animal shelter, putting up a bat or bird house on your property—the list is as long as your imagi-

York Times, September 1, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/world/africa/african-elephant-population-dropped-30-percent-in-7-years.html?ribbon-ad-idx=6&rref=world/africa&module=Ribbon&version=context®ion=Header&action=click&contentCollection=Africa&pgtype=article> (accessed on September 1, 2016).

¹¹“Global Warming and Polar Bears,” *National Wildlife Federation*, <http://www.nwf.org/Wildlife/Threats-to-Wildlife/Global-Warming/Effects-on-Wildlife-and-Habitat/Polar-Bears.aspx> (accessed on September 26, 2016).

¹²“Amphibian Extinction Crisis,” *NZ Frog*, <http://www.nzfrogs.org/Amphibian+Extinction+Crisis.html> (accessed on September 26, 2016).

¹³For more information, see “The Most Recent Extinctions,” *The Sixth Extinction*, <http://www.petermaas.nl/extinct-archive/lists/mostrecent.htm> (accessed September 26, 2016). Also, see Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

nation. However, again, the point here is not to demand any one of those things—or all of them. Instead, it is to see that the practice of Christian neighbor-love carries inherently within it the call to action: the call to intentionally and explicitly embody that love in acts of justice and mercy, acts directed not only at our human neighbors, but at our animal neighbors as well.

The Christian category of “neighbor” is loaded with meaning, and carries with it inherently, as key aspects of its definition, the call to neighbor-love. Further, the Christian practice of love has little to do with fond emotions, admiration, or affection. Instead, the Christian practice of neighbor-love invites us to “see” the other—pay attention and take notice—and then act definitively and explicitly on his or her behalf, to promote the flourishing of life for the neighbor. Finally, the command to love one’s neighbor is not limited to one’s human neighbors, but extends beyond the human family to our nonhuman brothers and sisters as well. As Jesus makes clear in his own life and ministry, this way of seeing the world and living in the world is a gift, not a duty—a sacred responsibility, but one that Christians can accept and carry out with a sense of joy. Christians embody their love for God by loving the neighbors whom God puts in their path—not only other people, but also bears, turtles, bats, deer, squirrels, and sparrows. In this way, not only are they neighbors to us, but we become neighbors to them, inviting them to surprise us with what they can teach us about God, thereby helping transform our own lives as well. ⊕

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