



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
April 28, 2019 Sermon

Of Empathy and Understanding

Psalm 104 (selected verses): Hebrews 4:14-16

But 21 seemed to have empathy for the pup . . . As Rick looked on, the strapping 21 played with the tiny wolf as though he were still a pup himself . . . This capacity for empathy was one of the qualities Rick loved most about wolves. It was very unusual in the animal world, except among canines (and humans). . . Over years of watching wolves, Rick had become convinced that empathy was the single most important trait that an alpha could have, and 21's capacity for it continued to amaze him.

Rick and Laurie and Doug—between them they knew more about the wolves of the Northern Range than even the Wolf Project biologists. The professionals recorded their subjects' ages and weights, their ranges and diets, their fertility and longevity. But the watchers knew their stories.—*American Wolf: A True Story of Survival and Obsession in the West*, by Nate Blakeslee

Preface to the First Scripture Lesson:

Earth Day was this past Monday, so today we celebrate Earth Stewardship Sunday—when we focus on the gift of creation and our role as caretakers of that gift.

When we think of God's creation, we often think first of God's ordering of things: separating the land and the water, the light and the darkness, setting the stars and the planets in their regular courses. And it's not just in Genesis. Our first reading—Psalm 104—also sounds that theme. Listen now for God's Word to us . . .

Preface to the Second Scripture Lesson:

If we are to be stewards, caretakers, of the earth, understanding the God-given order of things is important. The great scientist, Johannes Kepler, said that, in doing natural science, he was thinking the thoughts of God after God. And every gardener, when he or she digs and plants and fertilizes in accordance with the seasons—carefully, hopefully, prayerfully—does the same.

But as important as understanding the natural order of things is, one thing's even more important: empathy. Empathy: giving your attention to, caring about, identifying with, someone or something. Empathy: knowing and sharing a story—a world—together. I would argue—in fact, I will argue—that empathy is a prerequisite for true understanding.

The passage I'm about to read—Hebrews 4:14-16—tells of God's empathy for us and for the world in Jesus Christ. Listen now for God's Word to us . . .

Sermon:

When the hunter's rifle cracked, the black wolf took off into the willow trees, but the gray staggered and dropped into the snow.

The hunter, perhaps a quarter mile away, began to walk towards his kill. When he got within 50 yards, he was surprised to see the black wolf come out of the willows, and sit down, not far from the gray. In all his years of hunting, Steven Turnbull had never *seen* anything like this: the sound of his rifle, the felling of the other wolf, the approach of the hunter—the black wolf should have been a half mile away by now. But there he was; and there he sat. The two stared at each other. Neither moved. And then, the black wolf lifted its head and howled.

When the wolf finally stopped, Turnbull and the wolf continued to stare at each other. The wolf then lifted its head, and howled again—longer and louder this time. And then: one by one—from behind the willow trees—wolf after wolf after wolf after wolf after wolf. Eleven in all (Turnbull counted), coming out to form a kind of semi-circle around their fallen leader, all focused on her. The black howled a third time, and suddenly, they all joined in.

The otherworldly sound, the sheer overwhelming sadness of their cry—Turnbull had never *heard* anything like this. Not knowing what else to do, Turnbull turned and walked back to his truck—slowly, finding his own tracks, looking back over his shoulder time and time again. They were still howling as he got in his truck and drove away.

“Ask the animals,” Job declares, “and they will teach you.”

It is not often that the passing of a wolf merits a full-length obituary in *The New York Times*.

Dateline: December 8, 2012: Yellowstone National Park's best-known wolf, beloved by many tourists and valued by scientists who tracked its movements, was shot and killed on Thursday outside the park's boundaries, Wyoming wildlife officials reported.

The wolf, known as 832F to researchers, was the alpha female of the park's highly visible Lamar Canyon pack and had become so well known that some wildlife watchers referred to her as a “rock star.” The animal had been a tourist favorite for most of the past six years.

“She is the most famous wolf in the world,” said Jimmy Jones, a wildlife photographer.

Ask the animals, and they will teach you. Or to bring it to the case at hand: Watch the wolves, and they will teach us. Which brings me to Rick McIntyre.

To the researchers, that is, to the wildlife biologists, the slain wolf was known as 832F, but to rest of the world, she was “O-Six,” named for the year of her birth, 2006. And the number of those who knew her as O-Six, was, thanks to Rick McIntyre, legion.

O-Six was part of the “Yellowstone Wolf Project,” an effort of the federal government to reintroduce wolves into Yellowstone Park and the Northern Rockies. Wolves had been gone from Yellowstone and environs—in fact, from all the lower 48 states—since the 1920's. But in the 1990's, after almost twenty years of planning and political wrangling, they were brought back from the plains of western Canada and reintroduced into Yellowstone.

Rick McIntyre was—still is—an “interpretive ranger” for the National Parks system: one of those green-uniformed guides who gives talks and tours to visitors who come to the park. For the first part of his career, McIntyre was stationed in Denali National Park in Alaska, where he fell in love with watching wolves, eventually publishing a book of photographs and essays about them. When McIntyre heard of the Yellowstone Wolf Project, he quickly finagled himself a transfer there, where he just as quickly earned himself a reputation as “unsupervisable.”

When the wolves were first introduced into Yellowstone, no one knew quite what to expect. The proponents of the Project hoped that their numbers would increase, which they did; and also hoped that they would move beyond the boundaries of Yellowstone out into the Northern Rockies; which they also did. (The first transplanted wolves were all outfitted with GPS-equipped radio transmitter collars, as were all those born to them and their descendants, or at least as many of those as the wildlife biologists could spot and tranquilize.)

What was not expected was that some wolves would stay in the park (there was lots of room: the park covers almost 3500 square miles over parts of three states). But they did, especially in the Lamar Canyon, a sparsely wooded area of the park, with a road running through it, and many visitors on it. (contrary

to legend, wolves will not attack humans). Which meant that with a radio receiver (Rick had one mounted on top of his yellow Nissan X-Terra) and a spotting scope mounted on a tripod (Rick had a good one), and a little patience, you could observe more wolves in the park in a year than a wildlife biologist could outside the park in a career.

The problem was that the visitor's center where Rick was supposed to be teaching about wolves was 30 miles away where you couldn't see the wolves. So Rick kept driving over to the Lamar Canyon to pick up the signals, to track and to watch the wolves—before work, after work, on his lunch hour, on his breaks, when he was supposed to be working. Partly to appease his own conscience but more from his own passion, he began approaching visitors who parked next to him on one of the Lamar road's various pullouts, "Hello, my name is Rick McIntyre," he would say to them. "Would you like to see a wolf?"

Deemed "unsupervisable," he was transferred to the biology department, where a supervisor named Doug Smith—who will go down in the annals of administrators as a supervisory genius—said to Rick: "You want to show people the wolves, show 'em the wolves; and while you're at it, show us the wolves, too" (by "us," Smith meant the wildlife biologists, the PhDs and graduate students, associated with the project.)

And so, everyday, seven days a week, for fifteen straight years, never taking a day of vacation, never taking a day off, but taking and transcribing more than five million words of field notes (that's more than six times the number of words in the King James Bible), Rick McIntyre, showed people the wolves. And so an ever-growing wolf-watching community was born ("look for the guy with the yellow Nissan X-Terra, he's the guy, the wolf guy"), with Rick, and other wolf-watchers almost as dedicated as he, at its center.

And so, thanks to Rick McIntyre, as well as an Emmy-award winning documentary, *She-Wolf*, on the National Geographic channel, O-Six became the most famous wolf in the world.

But why O-Six of all the wolves? Well, she was the granddaughter of 21, and 21 was a legend.

21, was the alpha male of the Druid Pack, and a fierce fighter: Rick had watched him win many territorial battles—he'd once fought off five intruders single-handedly—but had never seen him actually kill a wolf. "He never lost a fight, and never killed a vanquished rival," Rick would tell park visitors. One year, 21 consolidated three different broods of pups carrying them one by one over an area of eight miles, and then, through the ensuing months, managed to provide food for all of them, with an unheard of 20 of the 21 surviving to adulthood (thus becoming the wolf equivalent of the Biblical Abraham: "Your descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands by the sea." And you will travel far to make it so.) Yet for all his fighting and hunting prowess, there was a nobility, even a gentleness, about 21. Rick loved to tell the story about 21 and one particular pup, the runt of its litter:

But 21 seemed to have empathy for the pup . . . As Rick looked on, the strapping 21 played with the tiny wolf as though he were still a pup himself giving him the attention he so seldom enjoyed from his siblings. . . . This capacity for empathy was one of the qualities Rick loved most about wolves. It was very unusual in the animal world, except among canines (and humans). . . . Over years of watching wolves, Rick had become convinced that empathy was the single most important trait that an alpha could have, and 21's capacity for it continued to amaze him.

Watch the wolves, and they will teach us.

O-Six was 21's granddaughter. She could bring down a bull elk by herself, something no other wolf could do. It took the biologists years to collar her: instead of cowering at their helicopters, she would lead them on a chase, darting in and out of the trees; it was a game to her. In defense of one brood of her pups, she once successfully fended off a grizzly bear—a grizzly can kill a wolf with one swat of its paw—for over seven hours. When four intruder wolves threatened another brood of her pups, she burst through them at full speed and led them on a wild chase, until she ran, full speed, straight off a fifty-foot cliff. The four pursuing

wolves stopped at the edge, baffled; the watchers, looking through their scopes, gasped in disbelief; but she had landed on a small ledge, an outcropping, ten feet below. From there she worked her way carefully to the bottom to cliff and back up to her pups whom she found safe and sound. But for all her moxie, it was again O-Six's empathy that, in Rick McIntyre's view, set her apart. Again, from Blakeslee's book:

Rick was grateful to see the kind of leader O-Six had become. Good alphas, he felt, modeled wisdom and mercy, as 21 had done. Wolves who rose through the ranks merely because they were the largest or the most ruthless often failed to thrive once they got to the top, and their packs suffered commensurately.

Watch the wolves, and they will teach us.

Of course, you *could* say that Rick McIntyre was guilty of anthropomorphism, that is, of projecting human characteristics, in this case, empathy, onto non-humans, in this case, wolves. But I'm not sure you *should* say that: after all, Rick McIntyre has watched more wolves than anyone else in the world. And to be honest, I'm not so sure that human beings have all that much empathy to project. Given the choice, I would rather be thrown to the wolves than to the human beings; wolves can be fierce, but never cruel as we humans are.

But before dismissing the possibility of human empathy altogether, watch the wolf watchers, and they will teach us. Blakeslee puts it this way: "the wolf-watchers knew more about the wolves of the Northern Range than even the Wolf Project biologists. The professionals recorded their subjects' ages and weights, their ranges and diets, their fertility and longevity. But the watchers knew their stories."

That's empathy: giving your attention to, caring about, identifying with, someone or something, knowing and sharing a story—a world—together. And empathy is a prerequisite for true understanding: the watchers know more about the wolves than even the Wolf Project Biologists.

And Blakeslee himself, in writing his book, tells the stories not just of the wolves and the wolf-watchers, but also of the hunters and ranchers who adamantly oppose the Yellowstone Wolf Project, including Steven Turnbull. It's clear that Blakeslee loves the wolves and wolf-watchers and also that he considers the perspectives of the hunters and ranchers limited. The statistics prove that drought, disease, flooding, overgrazing, other predators—and yes, climate change—accounted for the loss of more livestock (the ranchers' concern) and more elk (the hunters' concern) than the wolves did. But the wolves took their share—moreover, statistics do not distribute evenly: there were places and times when the wolves took more than their share. And the ranchers and the hunters felt their way of life threatened—and Blakeslee shows empathy for them as well.

Ask the animals, Job declares, and they will teach you: the hand of the Lord has done this: In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

God has empathy for all creation, giving attention to it, caring about it, identifying with it knowing and sharing our story—our world—together with us. And God has put the capacity for such empathy in us so that we can do the same. That's what it means for us to be stewards, caretakers, of the gift of creation. And of course we fail at our God-given task, witness the degradation of our natural environment, and our lack of empathy for one another in our conflicts over that degradation. And yet, despite that failure, God still shows empathy for us: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

And so there is hope for our world and our role as caretakers of the natural world: we have a great high priest who empathizes with us in our weakness and yet is without sin: Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. God has empathy for us and for all creation.

Watch the wolves, and they will teach us.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.