

“Do All Dogs Go to Heaven?”

Theme: The Gospel According to Dogs

Scripture: Isaiah 11:6-9

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon

Family/Community Activity for the week: Transforming the world is a huge calling from Jesus. Your family might help fulfill this calling in distant ways (e.g. sponsor a child from another country, go on a mission trip, donate to a food drive, or give blood). But even the simplest of personal acts can show someone you care. How can you love your neighbor today? Have your family write notes of gratitude to tape on their front doors. Write your neighbors to let them know you’re thinking about them, you’re thankful for them and you love them always. You can even leave some goodies on their front porch! Thank God for the chance to love those who are close to you, and for being able to serve God by loving others.

PLEASE plan to do a “LOVE OUR LOUD” project for worship next weekend as we will NOT be having regular worship services June 10-11! You can call the church office for more information at 970-247-4213.

Meditation Moments for Monday, June 5- Read Acts 1:1-8, Matthew 28:18-20. *“If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog,” Harry S. Truman (33rd U. S. President.)* Jesus, raised from the dead, was preparing to leave earth. Before ascending, he spent about forty days (cf. Acts 1:3) preparing his followers to carry on his work. Though his “marching orders” were clear, they must have sounded breathtaking and daunting to the little company of disciples. They’re still our orders, and still breathtaking: “make disciples of all nations ... to the end of the earth.”

- Jesus’ commission was not primarily about organizational charts or articles of incorporation. Though things like that are often helpful as tools to carry out Jesus’ mission, his basic commission (“make disciples”) involves a response that can only come from people. How do Jesus’ marching orders make it clear that, in the end, our mission as individuals and as a church are all about people?
- Surely the creator God could have written the news of Jesus in the clouds, or spoken it from the skies. Instead, God’s primary way of carrying out the mission was also about people: “You will be my witnesses.” What factors made it more effective for God to use people as witnesses? Whose witness has shaped your life? In what ways have you been able to live out Jesus’ commission for you to be one of his witnesses?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, give me a heart open to your Spirit’s power, and a willingness to answer your call, wherever you and your mission may take me. Amen.*

Tuesday, June 6 - Read Luke 4:16-21, Luke 19:1-10. *"You can say any foolish thing to a dog, and the dog will give you a look that says, 'Wow, you're right! I never would've thought of that!'"* —Dave Barry (author) At the end of Jesus' three years of public ministry, the outcome might have seemed like a real letdown to human eyes. He had only 120 or so followers, and determined hostility from the religious leaders of his nation. Yet from our vantage point, we can see that those three years of ministry changed the world forever. And a key to Jesus' ability to do that was his crystal clear, resolute sense of what his mission was, what he was here to do.

- Jesus quoted from (and adapted) Isaiah 61:1-3 in the synagogue in Nazareth to define his mission. "To preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" has a nice poetic ring. What can you do each day to live into the meaning of those words in the gritty, unpoetic, day-to-day realities of life?
- Zacchaeus, "a ruler among tax collectors, was rich." His wealth didn't come from hard, honest work. Tax collectors paid Rome a secret, fixed amount—everything else they collected was theirs. In other words, they got rich by cheating people. What did it say about Jesus' mission that he would go out of his way to reach out to an unlovely man like Zacchaeus? How did verse 10 express Jesus' unshakeable sense of his mission?

Prayer: *Lord, thank you that even as I seek you, you have been seeking me, as you did Zacchaeus. Help me respond as Zacchaeus did, setting aside anything that might get in the way of loving and serving you. Amen.*

Wednesday, June 7 - Read Romans 6:15-23. *"A dog teaches a boy fidelity, perseverance, and to turn around three times before lying down,"* Robert Benchley (humorist and actor.) Commentators aren't sure if Paul was mainly concerned about libertines who really thought God's grace meant they could do whatever they pleased, or legalists who made fun of his teaching about grace. Perhaps the Christian community in Rome had both types of people in it! Regardless, Paul insisted that accepting Jesus as Savior changes your life for the better. Being a disciple means giving control of your life to the Lord who can give you life.

- Pastor Stuart Briscoe said being free from sin means "adopting the attitude that sin, as a lifestyle, is no longer normative ... [Christians do] not have to go on sinning, and treating righteous living as something that is good if you can get around to it." In what ways has Christ given you the freedom to change your life for the better?
- We don't usually think much about slavery (though by some estimates there are as many as 27 million slaves in today's world), so Paul's image may startle us. Sin, he says, turns all who submit to it into slaves. What actions, feelings or thoughts have, at some point in your life, held you in their grip? How did (or will) Jesus' love free you from them?

Prayer: *Dear God, I thank you for the freedom you offer me as your disciple. Give me clear vision of the parts of my life where harmful thoughts or feelings still enslave me, and keep extending your freedom to every part of me. Amen*

Thursday, June 8 - Read Hebrews 10:19-25. *"Dogs are wise. They crawl away into a quiet corner and lick their wounds and do not rejoin the world until they are whole once more,"* Agatha Christie (author.) It was tough to be a Christian in the first-century Roman Empire. Early Christians needed each other's support and strength to stay spiritually on track. John Wesley echoed Hebrews in stressing the importance of living our faith in community—we are to encourage one another, "sparking love and good deeds."

- We all need encouragement to keep us going at times. That's what the writer to the Hebrews had in mind: "let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds" (verse 24). What factors in the world you live in make you want to seek out fellow Christians? When have you needed someone you trust to give you a boost in your life of faith? When have you done that for someone else?
- "Let's draw near," in verse 22, was a common early Christian expression related to worship. That's why one of Resurrection's membership expectations is that you be in worship each week unless you are sick or out of town (and if you're ill or away, you can watch worship any weekday at www.rezonline.org). This isn't a burden, but a blessing. If someone asked you, "Give me one good reason for going to worship," what would you say?

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for inviting me to draw near to you. And thank you for giving me the community of believers who can encourage and support me as we draw near to you together. Amen.*

Friday, June 9 - Read John 4:19-35. *"Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole,"* Roger Caras (photographer and writer.) It was a long, well-established reality: Jews and Samaritans didn't talk to one another. Jews and Samaritans shunned one another (cf. John 4:9). But the argument that "We don't do things that way" didn't deter Jesus. He saw a woman, and a city, ready to respond to his kingdom message of love. He was willing to change whatever he needed to change, if it meant reaching people who were "ripe for the harvest."

- Jesus' disciples saw Samaria and all of its people as a hopeless, ungodly place. Some of them probably wondered, "Why was Jesus wasting his time there?" As Jesus saw Samaritans making their way toward him, he said to the disciples, "Open your eyes and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest." Are there any "harvests" you might be in danger of overlooking, in your own life or near your church, just because they aren't as familiar or comfortable for you?
- "The woman" (verses 27-29) was the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well—she'd had five husbands and was thirsty for "living water." The disciples were surprised Jesus talked to her at all; so was she, at first. But Jesus saw a different potential in her, and she became the first "preacher" of the good news in the gospel of John. Is there someone you see in a negative light who might be worth a fresh look through Jesus' eyes?

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, Brandon Heath's song asks, "Give me Your eyes for just one second, Give me Your eyes so I can see ... Give me Your love for humanity." That's my prayer, too. Then give me your willingness to change in order to reach people you love. Amen*

Saturday, June 10 - Read Matthew 22:34-40. *"Every dog has his day, unless he loses his tail, then he has a weak-end,"* June Carter Cash (singer.) When a legal expert asked Jesus about the Greatest Commandment, he answered that we are to love God and love people. When we love our neighbors as ourselves, we show the love of Christ to those around us. Love is contagious and God wants us to show it to all we know. So our hope and prayer is that our church has grown numerically because of the way God ignites our hearts by His love.

- Novelist Paulo Coelho once said, "One is loved because one is loved. No reason is needed for loving." Loving your neighbor as yourself can be challenging. God calls us to love others the way God loves us—unconditionally. Loving our neighbors as ourselves means showing unwarranted love with no hesitation. What has stopped you from loving someone relentlessly today? How can you love them unconditionally tomorrow?

Prayer: *Gracious God, thank you for loving me unconditionally. Help me to recognize the moments in my life when I can relentlessly love those around me. Amen.*

Theme: The Gospel According to Dogs
“Do All Dogs Go to Heaven?”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

June 3-4, 2017 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Scripture: Isaiah 11:6-9

- 6 *In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together;
the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.
The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all.*
- 7 *The cow will graze near the bear.
The cub and the calf will lie down together.
The lion will eat hay like a cow.*
- 8 *The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.
Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes
without harm.*
- 9 *Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,
for as the waters fill the sea,
so, the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord.!*

VIDEO **Sermon Intro**

SLIDE **“Do All Dogs Go to Heaven?”**

DRAMA **“Falling in Love is Like Owning a Dog” by Taylor Mali**
(Presented by Bryan Welker and Cricket)

*On cold winter nights, love is warm.
It lies between you and lives and breathes
and makes funny noises.
Love can wake you up all hours of the night with its needs.*

Love can give you a sense of security:

*When you're walking down the street late at night
and you have a leash on love,
ain't no one gonna mess with you.*

*Love needs to be fed so it will grow and stay healthy.
Love does not like being left alone for long.
But come home and love is always happy to see you.
Love may break a few things accidentally in its passion for life,
but you can never be mad at love for long.
Love leaves you little surprises here and there.
Love makes messes.*

*Sometimes you just want to get love fixed.
Sometimes you want to roll up a piece of newspaper
and swat love on the nose,
But then love gives you big kisses,
And you laugh at the little things.*

*Sometimes love just wants to play.
Running you around the block, leaving you panting.
It pulls you in several different directions at once,
or winds around and around you,
until you're all wound up and can't move.*

*And love brings you together.
People who have nothing in common but love
stop and talk and greet each other on the street.
Most importantly, love needs love, and lots of it.
And in return, love loves you and loves you and never stops.*

I invite you to take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. You will find a place to take notes at the top

and I hope you will write down at least the few main points of the sermon today and anywhere else you feel this message speaks to you. Continued there and on the back side you will find daily Scripture readings which tie back into today's message, as well as a daily quote about dogs that are both humorous and inspirational. I hope you'll take the time to read the Bible daily on your own because I think you will find these verses to be encouraging and speak to our lives today.

Today, we conclude the sermon series we are doing on the Gospel according to dogs. Last week, we talked about how we see ourselves and our dogs and how sometimes they misbehave and sometimes we misbehave. We are all offered grace and mercy from God in the midst of our being human and that is something we should cherish.

Two weeks ago, we looked at how we are meant to see God's glory reflected in all of creation and how characteristics of God are often found in the animal kingdom in the Scriptures. God is compared to an eagle, a mother hen, a dove, a lion and the lamb, just to name a few. We look at how dogs, in their most noble ways, paint a picture for us of certain characteristics of God. Their loyalty, faithfulness, love, compassion, kindness reflect God's glory. Dogs can draw out of us empathy and compassion by their sheer presence. These are all ways in which dogs show us something of the character of God.

As we bring the series to conclusion, we're going to look at what really is the purpose of dogs and wrestle with the question that many people of asked me about whether our dogs or cats or any pets go to heaven.

Let's start by thinking about the purpose of a dog. There was a film that came out not long ago about a dog's purpose, which our family really enjoyed seeing. The idea behind the film is that a dog must be here on earth for something more. As I was thinking about this idea, I immediately thought of guide dogs. Nancy Peake is connected to our congregation and is now on her 13th guide dog that she has raised from

a pup. She works with Guide Dogs for the blind and they have about 1,000 puppies a year they work with. The puppies come to live with people like Nancy for a year and then they go to a trainer that works with the dogs before they are placed with a person in need of a guide dog. There are 1,400 raisers across the country and we have two of them with us in the 9:30 service today. They will have their puppies with them for you to see, but it is best if you don't pet them as they are in training. I sat down with Nancy and asked her about this ministry of hers and what she has seen as she has worked with dogs.

VIDEO Nancy Peake interview

I love that image of people feeling free, like they can now fly because of their new guide dog. Did you catch that? I also loved how those with guide dogs now connect more with other people and are no longer separated by a cane. It's clear that those dogs have become a part of the body of Christ.

I am reminded of a funeral I did early in my ministry for a woman who had a guide dog. She was dying of cancer and when I would visit her in the hospital room, there would be her dog next to her bed, and sometimes in her bed. After she passed away, we did her funeral and the entire front row were guide dogs and their owners, sitting and grieving together. Her dog sat in the end chair during the entire service and I could swear she knew what was going on!

I want to end with this question that is the title of the sermon. It's a question I get for when someone loses a pet, "Do our animals go to heaven with us? Do all dogs go to heaven like in the movie?"

I can tell you that there are certain animals which I hope do NOT go to heaven. I hope there are no tics or mosquitoes in heaven. But this question about dogs is certainly up for debate as seen by this humorous collection of church signs that has been floating around the Internet for quite a while and that many of you sent me over the years. It begins with a church sign from Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church.

GRAPHIC All-dogs-go-to-heaven

Across the street, at Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian Church, they have a different perspective.

GRAPHIC Only humans go to heaven—read the Bible

The response is...

GRAPHIC God loves all his creatures--dogs included

GRAPHIC Dogs don't have souls--this is not open for debate

GRAPHIC Catholic dogs to heaven--Presbyterian dogs can talk to their pastor

GRAPHIC Converting to Catholicism does not magically grant your dog a soul

GRAPHIC Free dog souls with conversion

GRAPHIC Dogs are animals--there aren't any rocks in heaven either

GRAPHIC All rocks go to heaven

The origins of this debate may be traced back to the humorist Will Rogers who said:

SLIDE *“If there are no dogs in Heaven, then when I die I want to go where they went.”*

Somewhat more cynically, writer James Thurber observed:

SLIDE *“If I have any beliefs about immortality, it is that certain dogs I have known will go to heaven, and very, very few persons.”*

Even though it may be the subject of a good deal of humor, the question of whether non-human animals go to heaven has been the topic of debates ranging from serious theological arguments to dinner table discussions, with answers spanning the spectrum from, “No,” (because only those with souls are privileged to enter heaven) to,

“Yes,” (because it wouldn’t really be heaven if it excluded our beloved pets) to something in between, such as animals go to heaven, but they end up in a place separate from “people heaven”.

Regardless of where they stood on this great debate, many people found it amusing that a Presbyterian church and a Catholic church would be arguing the issue in public on their outdoor signs, especially in the form of barbed jabs directed at each other’s theological interpretations. To those whose enjoyment of this religious debate was based on the notion that it actually took place, I’m sorry to say that it’s all just a bit of Internet humor. The fact that all the details in the pictures displayed above are identical save for the wording of the signs is a giveaway that the sequence was produced by someone using the Church Sign Generator web site.

I don’t know the answer for sure to this question, because I’m not in charge of who or what gets into heaven and who or what doesn’t. I can tell you that in the Scriptures, when Isaiah talks about the heavenly kingdom, this is what he said in the Scripture text we have before us today.

BIBLE *6 In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. 7 The cow will graze near the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow. 8 The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. 9 Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so, the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord!*

I remembered this text over spring break because my family was in San Diego and went to the San Diego zoo and got to go behind the scenes and meet this odd couple. I snapped the photo of Miley and

Bakka.

GRAPHIC Miley and Bakka

No, it wasn't an accident and the dog didn't sneak in there. This was done intentionally as part of the zoo's Animal Ambassador program. The San Diego Zoo's "Animal Ambassadors" are a special group of animals that are trained to travel to off-site events and participate in presentations. These exotic zoo inhabitants live off the main exhibit zoo areas where they pal around with domesticated friends.

There will be no more violence in the animal kingdom in the kingdom of heaven. If we take this literally, it sounds like he is saying there will be animals in the messianic kingdom. I don't know that for sure, but that's what it sounds like as I read the Scripture passage.

I love the fact that John Wesley, the founder Methodism, looked at that passage and interpreted it this way. He read that to say that animals had been wounded by human sin and may be in the kingdom of heaven they will be restored to the way they were in paradise. Some have suggested that will mean animals will even be able to communicate with us more clearly than they do now.

CS Lewis captured this in the Chronicles of Narnia where the animals could talk. Wouldn't it be interesting if your dog or your cat could talk to you?

While I don't know if there will be animals and the kingdom of heaven, I have done a number of pet funerals and we have in the back of funeral service that you can use for your dog or your cat if you have lost one of them, because it does feel like losing a family member. I have also buried hamsters and rabbits and rats. I can tell you that when we have lost cats or dogs, there will be lots of tears as we grieve the loss of the animals that have become a part of our lives. I find myself thinking, "God, I really hope you let these animals live in heaven?"

When I was a child, we had a dog named Lafayette and my sister had a cat named Boofy. They were actually buddies and did everything together, and when we moved near Portland, Oregon we were in an area which had a wooded forest nearby. Boofy disappeared one day and we didn't see her for several weeks and we assumed she had been eaten by a raccoon or fox which lived in the forest. Eventually, our dog Lafayette came out of the forest and across the field holding Boofy gently in her mouth and later at the doorstep and then sat next to her body for an entire day, mourning her loss. We had to bribe her with some food to get her away from the body so we could bury the cat which was in pretty sad shape by this time.

GRAPHIC Mikah and Smokey Jo

When we got Mikah, the dog pictures on one of the banners, at the Denver Humane Society, we had a cat named Smokey Jo and they were buddies. Smokey Jo lived to be a pretty old cat and my wife had to take her one Sunday while I was at church preaching and have her put to sleep. While we cried at Smokey Jo's passing, I think Mikah took at the worst and he moped around for several weeks.

GRAPHIC Mikah in Old Age

Clearly our animals experience grief and loss, and we experience those same things when we lose them. Here's a picture of Mikah just before he died, doing his favorite thing as he sat in the snow on our deck. I really hope that when I get to heaven I hear Mikah's howl, just like he did as the first snow began to fall each year. I hope I can hear Smokey Jo's purring. I'm not sure, but somehow it seems to me that there might be a place in heaven for these animals that mean so much to us.

I came across this poem by Rudyard Kipling entitled, "***A Dog for Jesus (Where dogs go when they die)***," that I thought summed it up well.

I wish someone had given Jesus a dog.

As loyal and loving as mine.
To sleep by His manger and gaze in His eyes
And adore Him for being divine.

As our Lord grew to manhood His faithful dog,
Would have followed Him all through the day.
While He preached to the crowds
and made the sick well
And knelt in the garden to pray.

It is sad to remember that Christ went away.
To face death alone and apart.
With no tender dog following close behind,
To comfort its Master's Heart.

And when Jesus rose on that Easter morn,
How happy He would have been,
As His dog kissed His hand
and barked it's delight,
For The One who died for all men.

Well, the Lord has a dog now,
I just sent Him mine,
The old pal so dear to me.
And I smile through my tears
on this first day alone,
Knowing they're in eternity.

Day after day, the whole day through,
Wherever my road inclined,
Four feet said, "Wait,
I'm coming with you!"

And trotted along behind.

As we close this series, I want to invite Brian Welker to join me one more time. Brian did a great job sharing with us that poem on how owning a dog is like falling in love, but he also wrote a great story about a very special dog of his that I would like them to share with us as we close.

GRAPHIC **Brian's Dog**

SLIDE **Prayer**

God created all things great and small, and they all reflect God's glory he cares for each of them, just like he cares for each of us. The meal we are going to celebrate today as a reminder of God's care and how much he loves each of you. Communion is meant to be a meal of remembrance. We might be remembering today pets that we have lost who reflected God's glory. We might bring with us memories of people who have touched our lives and shown us who God is and they now rest with him in God's eternal home. Each one of us is invited to bring those memories and an assurance that God meets us here at this table and he knows our names and he knows our hearts. He came that we might have life and have it to the full and that we might bring our brokenness and hurt and pain and sorrow to him.

SLIDE **Communion**