

*Pets Over People***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on March 6, 2022**

The topics for our messages for the next five weeks were chosen by our staff. I asked each staff person to offer me a subject that I could develop a message around. They were very kind to me. More kind than I would have been if they asked me. I received subjects such as pets, music, education. I would have asked for a sermon on the theological life of the fruit fly or are you a low sodium unitarian? or eternal life insurance, or tales of a 8 foot heterosexual, cisgender, left handed asthmatic. This morning we take up Regina's, our Congregational Administrator, question of is it ok to love pets more than people? Is it possible to love our pets more than people-or as much as people?

I say yes. When was the last time your cat, dog, bunny, bird, snake, or fish told that you were wrong, nagged you to hang up the wet towel, told you it is your night to do the dishes, gave you odd looks for what you were wearing, drove 20 in a 45, was disappointed in the meal you prepared, cut in a line that you had been waiting in for almost 45 minutes, told that you were a bad driver, or spent too much money? Never. Who waits for you at the door, rubs your legs and purrs, is excited and jumping to see you when you've just gone to your car and back, agrees with all our decisions, doesn't ask you to follow a budget, loves you without hair and makeup, sits quietly in a bowl of water without judgement, is happy with yesterdays lettuce and hay for dinner and didn't cut you off in traffic? Our pets do. I know if my chihuahua, Clara, could speak she would say, "everyone must adore you, you look fantastic in those skinny jeans, please eat more, you're perfect, I might die if you leave me alone again. I need you, you must be the smartest human on earth", and on and on. By the way, those are her words, not mine.

Don't take it from me. Some people have told me they prefer pets to humans. A number of famous people have also admitted that: "Pets love their friends and bite their enemies, quite unlike people, who are incapable of pure love and always have to mix love and hate." Sigmund Freud. "The better I get to know people, the more I find myself loving pets." Charles de Gaulle, former President of France. "You think dogs will not be in heaven? I tell you, they will be there long before any of us." Robert Louis Stevenson, author, Treasure Island. "The average pet is a nicer person than the average person." Andy Rooney. "If you want a friend in Washington, get a pet." Harry Truman. "Dogs never bite me. Just humans." Marilyn Monroe. Elton John's dog was the best man at his wedding. Drew Barrymore has bequeathed her house to her dog Flossie. Oprah Winfrey, at jury duty was asked to say something about herself,. She said, "I have a talk show. I'm single. I have eight dogs." "There are few (people) who have even a small surplus of intellectual powers. . . .with the others, it is better not to enter into any relations . . . what they have to say will not be worth listening to....To anyone who needs lively entertainment for the purpose of banishing the dreariness of solitude, I recommend a pet, in whose moral and intellectual qualities he will almost always experience delight and satisfaction." Arthur Schopenhauer, Philosopher.

Does your life get more complicated when humans enter it? I always say that this was a perfect plan until people got involved. Do we have to work harder to be in relationships with people? Absolutely. But why? On the face of it, preferring a pet over humans seems absurd. After all, a pet's thinking is limited, their speech non-existent. Yet, especially if people haven't been reliably kind to you, a pet offers certain advantages: Reliability. A pet will always be there for you. Non-judgmentalness. A pet will never disparage you. As was made famous by psychotherapist Carl Rogers, non-judgmental listening can often be of great benefit. No hidden motives. People are sometimes nice to your face and stab you in the back. Or they're nice until it becomes expedient not to be, for example, if serious money is at stake. With pets, what you see is what you get--consistent, unconditional love. Practical matters: A pet forces you to get out and take walks--healthy. If you're single, a pet is a date magnet.

I read a study by criminologist Jack Levin that reveals a possible reason that might surprise you. In this study, the participants were asked to respond to a fake news story about a victim who was assaulted with a baseball bat, leaving him or her unconscious with several broken limbs. While the story was the same, it differed in one crucial detail: the identity of the victim, which was either a one-year-old baby, an adult human, a six-year-old dog, or a puppy. Respondents showed the same level of empathy for the baby, the puppy, and the adult dog, but significantly less for the adult human. This suggests that our empathy level is unrelated to species. Rather, it has to do with perceived helplessness and vulnerability.

The natural affection we feel for animals can be compared to the affection we feel for our children. We impulsively care for them and desire to help them because they are unable to help themselves easily. Our perception of adult humans is that they can easily speak up for their rights or defend themselves from danger. But that is not true of children and animals, who are completely at the mercy of others for shelter, food, and protection. Children and animals both demonstrate an innocence that we feel compelled to protect. So in fact, our increased empathy for pets has nothing to do with a preference for a certain species, and everything to do with our innate human desire to protect and nurture those who are innocent and helpless.

The next time you find your blood boiling over the latest news story about an abused dog (or an abused child), now you can understand the reason. Another interesting fact that emerged from this study: female respondents were far likelier to show equal empathy for all four hypothetical victims. But beyond our impulse to care for the helpless, what else is going on in our relationship with animals? Unconditional Love. It's true. We all yearn for it and crave it. Someone who loves us for who we are. Who has zero expectations? Who is always happy to see us, no matter how grumpy we may be feeling. We crave unconditional love. In human relationships, this precious commodity is almost impossible to find. But not with pets. It doesn't matter if your boss yelled at you, your boyfriend broke up with you, or your car broke down on the Interstate. Your beloved pet is there for you. He is rubbing up against you, looking at you with those adoring eyes. Wagging his tail or purring contentedly. Animals touch the most intimate parts of our hearts: our need to nurture and protect, our need for companionship and love.

Your pet doesn't care whether you're skinny, rich, athletic, or popular. He or she just wants you: your presence, your affection, your voice, and your touch. And in this "dog-eat-dog" world (pun intended), that means everything. As a matter of fact, this unconditional love is so important to us that it can change our brain chemistry. Spending time with a pet has been found to lower

blood pressure, reduce stress hormones, and release chemicals that trigger relaxation. Overall, pet owners are just healthier (both physically and mentally) than those who don't own pets. Some of us even like to talk about our pets, going so far as to confide in them about our problems. And you won't find a more supportive audience anywhere. No matter what you tell them, they won't judge you. And they won't spill the beans to the FBI if those are the sort of secrets you have. They'll continue to love you just as much as they did before. And unlike humans, you never have to worry that they might talk behind your back or betray your confidence.

Remember “Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus” when Eight-year-old Virginia O’Hanlon wrote a letter to the editor of New York’s Sun, and the quick response was printed as an unsigned editorial Sept. 21, 1897. So, Yes, Regina, it is ok to love pets more than people. But we mustn’t forget that humanity can redeem itself. Is there hope for humanity? A few weeks ago, at the end of a pastoral care session, a member ended our conversation by posing a question: “In all the pastoral care you’ve done over the years, what have you found to be the single most important thing you’ve learned?” We agreed that I’d reflect for a few weeks and then respond, but I felt the wheels start turning right away. The question percolated in my mind in my quiet moments. It really got me thinking about the indelible impression my ministry and pastoral care to people has left on me.

Though I find being a minister inspiring, I have often wondered whether my intimate access to the real lives, real relationships, and raw emotions of so many people might one day leave me jaded. These last two years, especially, I’ve felt a gnawing sense of concern that I might be growing cynical about humanity. I’ve wondered what this could mean for my work, my life, my outlook. Perusing the comments section of any news article or social media post about current events gives me the feeling that I’m not alone in my concerns. These comments suggest a general sense of world-weariness that, for some, is accompanied by the sentiment that humanity is doomed to destroy itself. Many of us, it seems, are struggling to see the goodness in mankind or find cause for hope about the future.

We have good reason to be concerned about the state of humanity. Any conscious citizen of the world can see that there are numerous fractures in society that need mending. But while our concerns can spawn cynical views about the future or lead us to conclude that humanity is doomed, they can also be a source of compassion or inspire us to be the change. When that member posed her question about my experience as a minister, I found myself reflecting on it through the lens of my experience as a person inhabiting a world that can feel scary and bleak. And the more I thought about it, the clearer it became that, in fact, a singular lesson has emerged from all the hours I’ve spent offering pastoral care. And it’s this: If I try to look at humanity in a large-scale way, based on what I see in the news or social media, I feel discouraged and afraid. But getting to zoom that lens in to individual people, in the way that the pastoral care experience allows me to, I feel encouraged and inspired. This is the lesson I’ve learned, and I think it can be a lesson for all of us.

When we feel inclined to form conclusions about humanity, maybe we can choose a different point of focus. Maybe instead of painting with broad strokes and convincing ourselves that mankind is doomed, we can choose to look for all the examples we can find of kindness, generosity, humility, grace, courage, inspiration, and even love. Maybe we can encourage ourselves to embody those qualities we want to see more of, and act in the ways we wish all

people would. It's possible—at least I choose to believe it is—that instead of letting our frustrations with “people these days” lead us to the conclusion that we're doomed, we can let it open us up to curiosity about how we can shift our focus, our energy, our attitudes, and our actions toward creating the world we'd prefer to inhabit.

May it be so.