

John 15:12-17 Luke 22:24-27 II Corinthians 5:17-19
“Survival of the Friendliest”

If you like animals and pets at all, would you say you are more a cat person or a dog person? Though I have had dogs, through most of my life I would say I have been more a cat person, attracted to their introversion, quietness, independence, no nonsense spirit, and low maintenance.

As someone wisely observed, “Thousands of years ago cats were worshiped, and they have never forgotten it.” Mark Twain said, “Of all God’s creatures, there is only one that cannot be made slave of the leash. That one is the cat. If a human could be crossed with a cat, it would improve the human, but deteriorate the cat.” Cats tell us things like, “Be frisky, pounce on possibilities, enjoy the night life, always land on your feet, stretch often, delight in the simple joy of a long nap, create your purr---fect day.

But then things changed. You see I married a dog person, and ended up for the first time in my life with a dog in the house, and in the bed. Unfortunately, the cute Shih Tzu dog named Bear was getting old and was in failing health, and had to be put at peace. But after some years, another dog came along, Zeke, a rescue puppy, loaded with energy, spirit, teeth to chew things, including bodies, and a spirit that said, “Be loyal, delight in the simple joy of a walk or run, unleash your talents, hide your favorite snack, play and learn new tricks no matter your age, and always run to greet loved ones when they come home.”

In keeping with an Episcopal priest named Matthew Fox, who said his dog was his spiritual director, I would have to say that Zeke has become my spiritual director.

A spiritual director, with roots in many religious traditions but especially the Catholic tradition, is typically a person who gives witness and guidance to another person’s spiritual unfolding into God. Therapists help examine mental and emotional brokenness, like a broken branch on a tree or a brown spot on a leaf. But spiritual directors help persons examine the wind blowing through the tree branches, through the leaves, and through the brokenness or disease.

Zeke has become my spiritual director, my wind through the trees, in multiple ways. His full name Ezekiel means “strength of God” or “God will strengthen.” Zeke has had so much energy and spirit, that we decided to do a DNA test to assist with our planned skilled training, though it soon became clear Zeke was training us. Guessing he was a Chug (a cross between a Pug and a Chihuahua), we were surprised at his DNA. Pekingese 19%, Pomeranian 17%, Shih Tzu 13%, Chihuahua 11%, American Pit Bull, 8%, Parson Russell Terrier 6%, Papillon 4%, Poodle (Toy and Miniature) 4%, Labrador Retriever 4%, American Staffordshire Terrier 3%, Bichon Frise 3%, Russell Terrier 2%, Toy Fox Terrier 2%, Shetland Sheepdog 2%, Collie 2%. The bottom line is that Zeke is 60% companion dog, with 21% mischievous Terrier thrown in, and 11% guard Pit Bull. We soon saw this dog was a thoroughbred, a thoroughbred, multi-cultural mutt.

After such a surprising test, I then had to ask how a dog like Zeke came to exist. I learned through a *60 Minutes* segment that all dogs come from wolves, those furtive, fear-inducing critters that are kind and playful within their pack, but fleeing and vicious to those outside. They create fear, and supposedly exemplify the heart of life’s unfolding process as survival-of-the-fittest-

But as I wondered how Zeke could be so friendly to people and to other dogs, I was educated that wolves came to see that they benefited, not just from survival-of-the-fittest-competition, but

more from survival-of-the-friendliest-cooperation, as they searched out and connected to humans for food and well being. The two survival plans stand out in the history of life's unfolding as we know it, and though we typically see, emphasize and often live out survival-of-the-fittest-competition, we are often unaware of or ignore survival-of-the-friendliest-cooperation. This survival-of-the-fittest-competition emphasis has had great effects on all relationships -- dog, other creatures, humans. We need only look at nature videos to see, not only exquisite beauty, but the terrible violence of one creature killing another for food.

But long ago, Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as pointing us to the lesson that wolves learned and Zeke exemplifies. Survival-of-the-friendliest-cooperation is to be the way of holy kinship, the way of the future. Fleeing, competing, overpowering, controlling, winning by force, using violence does not ultimately work the best.

Jesus is portrayed saying, "The kings of the pagans have power over their people. But this is not the way it is with you; rather, the greatest one among you must be like the youngest or least, and the leader must be like the servant. I am among you as one who serves." (Luke 22:25-27) "I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends. This then is what I command you: love one another." (John 15:15,17) Jesus is portrayed using another name for this survival-of-the-friendliest-cooperation, what we call the Holy Spirit. "If you love me, you will love one another. And God will send you a helper, a companion, a friend, the Holy Spirit, who reveals the truth about God." (John 14:15-17)

In many ways, we humans are still living in the wolf-like spirit of survival-of-the-fittest-competition. In almost all of our relationships, even our most intimate ones, we resort to competing, controlling, winning, making others losers, trying to force others to be in our image, being afraid, even fleeing. Famed preacher Barbara Brown Taylor put it like this, "Human beings never behave more badly toward one another than when they believe they are protecting God. Kindness is not a bad religion. Always choose kindness over meanness. The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the other as oneself - - to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince, or control, but simply as someone who springs you from the prison of yourself."

A small boy once went to a rabbi. "Rabbi, how can I befriend God, someone I can't even see?" Son, start with a stone. Find a stone and try to befriend it. Learn its beauty and goodness. Then when you have befriended a stone, find a flower. Befriend it and learn its beauty and goodness, even its smell. After you have befriended a flower, befriend your little puppy dog. Learn his beauty and goodness and loyalty. After you have befriended your dog, befriend a mountain or a river, and learn its beauty and goodness and wildness. And after you have befriended a mountain or a river, then befriend a woman. Learn her beauty and goodness and uniqueness. And after befriending a woman as a person, then you perhaps you can befriend God.

All across the multi-cultural environment of our nation today, we often find such befriending hard, for are afraid of those outside our group, those different by race, by immigrant nationality, by gender, by whatever. We resort to wolf-like survival-of-the-fittest-competition to protect ourselves, our own people, our way of life, our prejudices.

The political realm of our nation is a mess. Divisions seem to be set in stone. Leaders have played on fears and convinced people that survival-of-the-fittest-competition is the only way to defend themselves, defend freedom, even if it means selling \$21 billion of guns in 2022, when

there are already 393 million guns in America, with only a little more 6 million registered. Leaders have played on fears and convinced people that survival-of-the-fittest-competition is the only way to survive, even if it means insurrection or threats to democracy. And across our larger world, nations live in fear of other nations, often resorting to terrible wars to defend their own interests.

But amid it all there is Jesus, humble spiritual directors like Zeke, who call us to Jesus-like survival-of-the-friendliest-cooperation. A PBS special once aired world famous horse trainer Monty Roberts, who has been called by some a horse whisperer. His approach is to avoid violence and use a circular ring. Roberts approaches horses with direct eye contact and squared shoulders. Since this is predatory body language, the horse tries to flee to the outer circular wall. Roberts doesn't aggressively pursue the horse, but continues to follow it around the circular wall until the animal tilts its closest ear, approaches with curiosity, licks, chews, and drops its head. Roberts then averts his eyes, sets his shoulders at a 45 degree angle, and walks away. The horse invariably follows, and soon there is a join-up and stroking, followed by bridling and saddling.

Monty Roberts thinks the same techniques work for people. As a crusty horseman, he offers some advice on engaging others with good. In a book, *Horse Sense for People*, he says, "It is never good to back others into corners. If they want to go away, they should be allowed to do so."

"We need to make it easy for others to do good rather than do wrong. Violence and force are never the answer to anything, because violence is always for the violator, not for the victim. No one has the right to say to any creature, animal or human, 'You must or else I will hurt you.'"

So how do we find this survival-of-the-friendliest-cooperation. Jesus would tell us, through spiritual directors like Zeke, at least three things. In dog terms, first, engage. Run toward others, wag your tail if you must, even jump up or playfully bite, bark, slobber a kiss. Call to mind that all the great wisdom traditions of the world recognize the main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self-absorbed. I know that Zeke's call to engagement certainly humbles my often embraced apathy and self-centeredness.

Second, listen. In dog terms, sit on your haunches, tilt your head to the side, with one ear up and one ear half down, knowing you don't have to be afraid of the other. For, in the words of scientist Carl Sagan, "the other is cosmically precious, and if that human disagrees with you, let that one be and live. In a 100 billion galaxies, you will not find another like this one."

Third, give up control and competing domination, born out of fear and trying to live only for your own tribe. Learn to take on the leash, and walk beside another as a servant and friend, knowing that together you will discover more together than by yourself. You will learn to overcome your fears with a companion.

Back in the 12th century, the people of a little Italian city called Gubbio proudly lived in the beauty of their place. But one night a shadowy creature came out of the nearby woods and prowled through the streets, and the next morning the people found a mangled and gnawed body.

The attacks began to happen again and again. An older woman identified the creature as a wolf, so the terrified people turned to St. Francis of Assisi, the holy man who supposedly knew how to talk with animals. They told St. Francis to preach to the wolf about obeying the commandment not to kill, calling the wolf to follow Jesus' commandments to love God and neighbors.

Just in case the wolf couldn't control himself, he was to be told to relocate. Francis went into the forest calling, "Brother wolf, brother wolf." Francis came back to the people and told them, "My good people, my good people of Gubbio, you must feed your wolf." The people were furious at the suggestion that the uninvited creature was to be regarded as their wolf. But they fed it and the killing stopped.

Jesus, even Zeke, out of the unfolding life of the cosmos, an unfolding life shown in wolves and dogs, remind us that survival-of-the-friendliest-cooperation will win the day against survival-of-the-fittest competition. Scientists, even those with little religion, now tell us that we humans, 8 billion of us, have thrived more through cooperation than competition. That cooperation has led to altruism or concern for others, as we discover that what is good for all, is good for each one of us.

A Dutch historian and thinker named Rutger Bregman wrote a book several years ago called *Humankind: A Hopeful History*. In the book, he takes on the assumption of most ancient and modern thinkers that humans are basically bad at their core, selfish and governed primarily by self interest and a survival-of-the-fittest mentality. He refers to William Goldman's classic novel *Lord of the Flies*, where a group of boys, stranded on an island, turn to running roughshod over the weaker ones, even killing three, and leaving the island in ruins.

In actuality there is a true story of some school boys who, in 1965, took a fishing boat to set out for Tonga, got caught in a storm, and shipwrecked on a deserted island in the Pacific Ocean. They survived for one year before being rescued by an Australian Sea Captain. The boys worked in teams of two, set up work rosters for the garden, the kitchen, and guard duty. Quarrels were resolved by time outs, where the quarrelers came back together after 4 hours, apologized, and stayed friends. One reviewer in *USA Today*, sums up *Humankind* with these words. "Bregman reminds us that most people are good, and we do ourselves a disservice by thinking the worst of others. Human kindness is the foundation for lasting social change."

The core idea of *Humankind* was revealed to an astronaut named Rusty Schweikert back in 1969, when he was left to float around the earth in complete cosmic silence while on a spacewalk. His capsule had developed a problem, which extended the walk temporarily. As a macho jet pilot and red, white, and blue American, he had previously seen the Earth as divided between the free and right world, and everybody else. But in space, he looked back on the Earth, a shining gem against a total backdrop, and realized everything he cherished was on that gem, his family and land, music and history, humanity with all its folly and grandeur. He then saw rivers and oceans flowed indiscriminately between free nations and all the other ones. He saw that actually there were no nations except in human minds. He saw that despite all our conflicts and wars, interdependence was all that really existed. When he got back to earth he spent 6 months stumbling around in a state of stupor and awe, asking, "Why did this happen to me?" He finally concluded it happened so he might tell others of the power that comes through survival-of-the-friendliest-cooperation, interdependence, oneness, unity, community, compassion, and love, the power of God.

Jesus would tell us, and little dog Zeke would tell us, to let this power, this Holy Spirit friendship, blow in and through us all. "I call you friends," Jesus said. So let it be.