Outreach Sunday The Rev. Teri Shecter

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I feel like I’m speaking to professionals here - like any one of you could stand here and talk about the topic of outreach, which is what I have been asked to speak on today.

I was not a natural when it comes to outreach…for whatever reason I associated it with “evangelism” and “proselytizing”. I imagined it was a task I needed to have mastered before I began. An activity I should be able to articulate in detail. I thought it looked a certain way, like THIS and not like THAT and that it lived in a neat little box confined by that definition. A bit dusty, stodgy, old school, smelling faintly musty. It as something engaged in by committee………not a freelance endeavor

In writing this reflection on outreach I have resisted the urge to google the meaning of the word. Instead I went to the experts. Last Sunday I did an informal survey to see how folks here define the word. I asked for one of two words to describe outreach:

* Serving others
* Reaching out
* Helping those we don’t usually help
* Community
* Helping
* Loving and serving
* Sharing ministry outside church walls
* Sharing
* Service
* And my favorite: bothering your neighbors

During the last year I’ve been swept into a vortex of outreach. It’s been a wild ride, and in the relative calm of the last month I’ve spent a great deal of time pondering the significance of where I’ve been and what I’ve learned. A disclaimer here: *the lessons I’ve learned are my own…they may be wrong.*

The core value that drives my life is the desire to participate in the healing of the world…..everyday. I believe that God calls me and each of us to this work. The passion of my beliefs fuels the purpose of my life and impels me to act. Love this bright, this compelling is so attractive that I don’t **want** to say no.

I’ve learned that outreach requires I go as a student. Not as someone who has all the answers. I have to be willing to learn, to look foolish, to **NOT** be the shining star (I so love being a shining star…). I think I will always feel like a beginner, a neophyte as I navigate the opportunities in front of me to bring Gods love to a broken and wounded world.

In April I went to Washington, D.C. as a citizen lobbyist with Defenders of Wildlife. There is a definite distinction between professional lobbyist who are paid to do their job and passionate civilians who are all volunteers. Each of us was driven solely by the passion of our beliefs.

Our mission was to meet with our senators and representatives and tell them – as clearly and succinctly as possible - why we support protecting the lives of endangered animals. I know some of you have engaged in lobbying at both state and national level. I had not …AND… Let me make this clear…. **I AM NOT A FAN OF POLICTICS**. I do not engage in it as a sport or a hobby. I don’t find it fascinating or entertaining. I participate out of a sense of duty and responsibility to my community and my planet.

Given an opportunity like this, to talk about why I believe endangered animals are important, I couldn’t turn it down I discussed with Caitlin Cattellino, our Colorado Defenders of Wildlife representative, the possibility of going as clergy. I told her I could go as “Teri who is passionate about protecting animals” or as Rev. Shecter, a deacon representing the National Episcopal Church whose core values include “Care for all Creation”. She chose the Rev…and I went to Washington in clergy attire. Before we arrived in DC we were given plenty of homework to read and take notes on. Although I had a general understanding of the Endangered Species Act, there was a great deal of information I was not familiar with.

Twenty-two of us from numerous western states met in Washington at the Defenders of Wildlife headquarters. We were given additional information about the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Endangered Species act. We polished and rehearsed our personal 1- to 5-minute statements on our views and the reasons why we had traveled so far to speak about these issues. The following day we spent at the House and the Senate in meetings. My own message to Senator Bennet, Senator Gardner and Representative Tipton centered on why I believe God cares about endangered animals, why the Episcopal Church supports my views…and why they, as my elected officials, should.

It’s easy to believe that lobbying is a waste of time..what does it really accomplish? Does anyone even care that we flew from Casper, Wyoming or Helena, Montana or Grand Junction, Colorado? Defenders assured us that lobbying in person by unpaid constituents is one of the most effective ways to sway the options of our elected officials. I sincerely hope it did that. What I know it accomplished was to change me. I am an “unwilling” activist. I would rather read, run, watch a movie, bicycle, camp…or gosh darn it…..clean the bathroom….. than practice outreach via political activism. And yet ---as much as I dislike it, as uncomfortable as it makes me…I believe it is vitally important.

**I’D LIKE TO PAUSE HERE FOR A SHAMELESS COMMERICAL**: Caitlin Cattellino will be here, at Nativity on Tuesday night, July 31st, from 6:30 to 7:30 to talk about the Endangered Species Act as part of our Caring for all Creation lecture series.

The older I get …the fewer separations I see in the world. For example, environmental health, human health, and animal health are all connected. Deficits in one affect all the others. This is the concept of One Health, a global initiative, described on its web site as:

“……a worldwide strategy for expanding interdisciplinary collaborations and communications in all aspects of health care for humans, animals and the environment.” (http://www.onehealthinitiative.com/about.php).

This may help you understand why a bunch of gringos from Colorado traveled to the smallest, most densely populated Central American country of El Salvador to spay and neuter owned cats and dogs. You could argue that the money would be better spent on a number of services to the country’s poor. Why were these humane organizations spending thousands of dollars on dogs and cats??? The simple answer is: it’s not possible to solve world problems one at a time. We can’t provide medical care to all children *before* we protect and care for animals. We are in a precarious position…the planet itself can’t wait for us to feed all the poor *before* we restore our oceans and rivers to health. There is no first and last…all the issues are connected and everything depends on the wholeness and health of everything else. All healing is necessary and important.

In El Salvador I worked with veterinarians and veterinary technicians from the US, Mexico and El Salvador. We set up an outdoor clinic in the public space of a school in El Espino, which is a small community an hour by bus from the capital of San Salvador. There were “stations” arranged for intake, anesthesia, intubation, shaving, surgery, and dog and cat recovery.

Veterinary school students from San Salvador volunteered their time to assist the other professionals. The rest of us…the unskilled volunteers… got to shave the tender nether regions of cats and dogs, help prepare for surgery, and aid in recovery. When we arrived each of the 3 days at 8am, there were already lines of folks with animals waiting for us. We worked 15 hr. days spaying and neutering 300 cats and dogs.

My job was in cat recovery. We were housed in a first grade classroom that had tables covered with Wal-Mart beach towels. Heavily sedated cats and kittens were brought in after surgery and lined up on our tables so we could monitor them as they slept off the effects of the anesthesia. We took temperatures and used hairdryers and towel to keep core temperatures stable. I learned a valuable lesson…cats waking up from anesthesia **ARE NOT** **HAPPY**. Little Fluffy will try to eat your face off if not placed quickly into a safe container. They are disoriented, grumpy and groggy and will personally blame the first human they see for their condition.

Like Pet owners everywhere who love their cats, these folks hovered outside the classroom door waiting for their cats to be cleared to go home. Most had walked several miles to get to the clinic. Kitties arrived in cloth grocery bags and cardboard boxes. The cats were just as happy as you might imagine. I cheerfully mangled the Spanish language and entertained numerous locals who were waiting for their animals. I made intelligent comments such as “pretty cat” or “is this a devil-cat?”…or my very creative favorite “does this cat speak English??” This caused riots of laughter….but maybe that was my pronunciation…

Dogs and puppies recovered in a classroom on the other side of the school. Dogs are not as ----ummm-----unreasonable when coming out of anesthesia, so their owners were able to sit with them and gently shake them to help them wake up. Often children and parents were present all sitting on the floor with a towel or blanket around their dog. Some groggy dogs were treated to wheelbarrow rides home. Others tottered off unsteadily for home with their humans.

My own reasons for going to El Salvador on this spay/neuter campaign were deeply emotional. I’ve been to Mexico twice and Nicaragua once. I’ve visited most of the Caribbean island countries. Everywhere I’ve seen animals abandoned and starving. It is not easy to witness this kind of suffering. Finally I was in a position to ACT…to be part of project to reduce suffering on a large scale. If I had NOT gone to El Salvador…the other folks would have done fine without me….and so would the animals. But if each of us made the choice not to go, one bright candle in the darkness would have remained unlighted and 300 animals and their human companions would not have been helped.

If I had NOT gone I would not have met the incredibly warm and welcoming people of El Salvador who gave to me far more than I gave to them. I would not have gotten to meet the animals they love and understand in a deeply personal way that the bonds that make us one are far stronger than we can imagine.