

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper  
Sunday, March 27, 2022  
Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**“Interspecies Vulnerability”**

**Christian Scripture: John 15:9-17**

On vacations in Durban, South Africa, my family would frequently visit a theme park combined and aquarium called ‘*uShaka*’. *uShaka* is a play on words that combined the iconic indigenous African leader King Shaka with a word that in the local language, *isiZulu*, also meant ‘Shark’. *uShaka* is very similar to what we have in the United States, Sea World, except it was more intimate, and you did not have to get a second mortgage on your home to afford lunch and a drink.

In Africa, one can do things, more accessibly, that you can’t necessarily do in the USA. For example, at *uShaka* you can learn how to scuba dive in the aquarium! I waited for my young boy, Micah, to turn ten, the minimum age one could be certified, and I signed us up for scuba diving lessons.

Of course, our lessons began with the basics. For example, we stuck our heads in buckets of water to learn how very uncomfortable it is to try to breathe underwater. For some reason, that seemed like an obvious lesson. Then we graduated to a small pool where we learned basic techniques that we were told

would prevent our lungs from exploding. Then by week two or three, we graduated to instruction in the aquarium.

The aquarium was quite an intimidating place to learn to scuba dive because, well, there were, as we say in South Africa, hundreds of ‘proper’ sized sharks in the aquarium. Our family had seen quite a few shark feedings over the years we visited the aquarium. It is pretty fascinating to see in a few seconds of turbulent frenzy a large dead fish thrown in the water transform into a foggy blood-stained cloud of shredded flesh. So, as my son and I entered the aquarium and began to swim around, I became very nervous. While I felt myself to be a relatively large enough portion to avoid the sharks’ interest, my little son looked only large enough to be a bite-sized appetizer! I quickly objected to the instructor that perhaps this was not a good idea. I argued that scuba diving in the ocean was one thing, but diving in an aquarium filled with sharks was another. My instructor looked at me strangely and retorted, “From where do you think we get the sharks in the aquarium? The ocean! At least in the aquarium, we feed them. No one feeds them in the ocean. Which is where we go next!”

Sharks have survived four mass extinctions. You know, they’re older than the dinosaurs! And yet today, in the wake of climate change, pollution, and commercial fishing, sharks are endangered. “As an apex predator, [the] steep decline in sharks has massive ramifications for marine ecosystems and the

economy more broadly, and because sharks don't produce offspring at nearly the levels of other fish, it's very difficult to help shark populations get back on track."<sup>1</sup> Now, listen to this. Sharks are older than trees. I kid you not. The oldest species of tree is 350 million years.<sup>2</sup> Sharks are 450 million years old. And they are endangered. Humans are only 200,000 years old.<sup>3</sup> That means sharks have been around 2,250 times longer than humans. Not twice as long. Not ten times as long. But, 2,250 times as long as humans!

All of this has got me thinking. Sharks, as a species, have been around 2,250 times longer than my son has been around as a species. Fact: the sharks are not on land where we often are. Fact: our 'head in the bucket' exercise taught me that my son should not be where the sharks are. Shark populations are in danger. My son was in danger. Conclusion: both my boy and sharks are incredibly vulnerable. Both species are vulnerable. But, the sharks have not made themselves nor my

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<sup>1</sup> Ethan Brown, "Sharks have Survived four Mass Extinctions, But Now They Are Endangered", *The Sweaty Penguin*, Public Broadcasting Corporation, podcast, December 17, 2021. Found at: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/peril-and-promise/2021/12/sharks-have-survived-four-mass-extinctions-but-now-theyre-endangered/>, accessed March 25, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Signorelli, "Ten Interesting Facts about Sharks", Australian National Maritime Museum, February 10, 2020. Found at: <https://www.sea.museum/2020/01/16/ten-interesting-facts-about-sharks#:~:text=Sharks%20have%20existed%20for%20more,mass%20extinctions%20%E2%80%93%20now%20that's%20impressive>, accessed March 25, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Rafferty, John P., "Just How Old Is Homo Sapiens?". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Invalid Date, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/peril-and-promise/2021/12/sharks-have-survived-four-mass-extinctions-but-now-theyre-endangered/>, accessed March 25, 2022.

boy vulnerable. It is the hubris, the arrogance, of humans that have made humans and sharks vulnerable.

In her book, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred*, Victoria Loorz calls us to recognize and celebrate what her friend, Lisa Dahill, terms ‘interspecies vulnerability’. Dahill invites “us out of our massive collective cosmological delusion and denial” that we humans are exceptional, that we are unique to all other life forms and are exempt from the Earth’s system of predation.<sup>4</sup> Remembering my fear of sharks eating my son reminded me that we as humans are a part of Creation’s web of predation. Despite surviving four mass extinctions, sharks can be rendered extinct by humans’ wanton destruction of their populations and ecosystems. And without healthy ecosystems, humans and sharks are vulnerable.

Now, do not misunderstand Victoria. By accepting ‘interspecies vulnerability’, she is not advocating that sharks be permitted to eat my son! No. Nor is she necessarily arguing that we all become vegetarians or vegans (although you may). Victoria instead just proposes to us, ‘What would it be like if we could not merely acknowledge, but also **celebrate** that we are mortal members of a world that remains alive only through a reciprotic exchange of life and death with

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<sup>4</sup> Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 156.

other species? What if we stopped understanding ourselves as exceptional and thus more deserving of life than any other species? What if we not just understood ourselves, but **celebrated**, that we exist within a mutual system of life and death with other species?

What prevents me from celebrating humans' mutuality with other life is the theological belief that *only* humans are 'made in God's image'. This belief was sacrosanct until I went running last week. On the West River Trail, I stopped. I observed. I listened. I prayed. I thought, 'Oh, my Lord. How beautiful!' And like a fog that lifted from my mind and heart, I realized that all that which I observed was beautiful was actually *dead and decaying* along with that which was alive and growing! The season of Lent reminds us that "from dust I came and to dust I shall return'. I will die and decay as does the tree. Yet, the fallen dead tree covered with moss is as beautiful as the erect tree full of life! All organic life that dies provides food, shelter, nutrients, and even enhanced aesthetic beauty for all that subsequently and consequently lives. All life sacrifices for other life. All life sacrifices for other life. This was the beauty. The beauty I observed was mutual, reciprocal, sacrifice: life for life. I realized all life, not just human life, is made in God's image and it is designed for mutual advantage and vulnerability.

Friends, let us bring this new theological paradigm down to this table at which we gather for Holy Communion. In our scripture this morning when Jesus

taught “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”, he clearly intended to speak about his friends, the disciples. As Christians, we easily take the next step and extrapolate. We accept the profound tenet Jesus taught to apply to members of our families. We even extrapolate further. We apply Jesus’ teaching to one another gathered here – this is what we do during Holy Communion. Some us, military veterans, especially, who have sacrificially served this country, extrapolate further and apply Jesus’ teaching to citizens of the United States. And we extrapolate further to also include generations of citizens who are not yet born. So, should we not then also extrapolate further and apply such a faith tenet to Haitians, Nigerians, Yemeni, Filipinos, and Kiribatians who are the most vulnerable to climate change?<sup>5</sup> Why can’t we also extrapolate God’s call to love one another to, yes, sharks too?

The deacons are now serving you raspberries, blackberries, and, so that you understand us being at Christ’s table, grapes. Eat these products of Creation as I conclude this message. These berries and grapes are Earth’s gift, Earth’s sacrifice, for you. You are by consuming the life of these berries and grapes consuming that which was sacrificially given to you. Jesus taught, “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in

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<sup>5</sup> Tara Law, “The Climate Crisis Is Global, but These Six Places Face the Most Severe Consequences”, *Time Magazine*, September 30, 2022.

my name". Can you now love these berries and grapes as you love one another and thus, in part, devote your life to loving God's Creation and sacrifice of yourself for it?

John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world". Later in John, Jesus preached, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:13). Is it so far-fetched to love the world as Christ "so loved the world"? Let us celebrate that all people on the Earth, all species of the Earth, even these berries and grapes, are our 'friends' with whom we share life and death, advantage and vulnerability. And that, my friend, is beautiful beyond all compare!

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"