

ON PESTS, PREDATORS, AND STEWARDSHIP

by Rev. Anne Robertson

Grandma Robertson was best known for her compassion toward wasps. She fed them. Sugar water. On her finger. She accepted their stings as merely ignorance on their part, and even when she fell into a nest of them and was stung all over her body, she maintained their goodness and innocence. The only thing Grandma loved more than wasps was her flower gardens. She had many, and she tended them from dawn until after dark.

It is hard to say why a woman who would feed a paper wasp on her finger would turn on a cute, furry woodchuck, but when her forensic examinations turned up their teeth on her bulbs, the sentence was death. Into the house she came to find my father and his shotgun. No matter that in our household we spent our time rescuing mice from our two cats, filial duty called and my father reluctantly went out to hunt woodchucks. As a young child, I was inconsolable.

When he went for his gun, I ran for my room, screaming and crying and putting my pillow over my head to muffle the sound of death. Something was terribly wrong with the world, to my small mind. The woodchucks were hungry, and they had found food. They were not devouring children. They were not competing with our family for a scarce food supply. They just ate a few of Grandma's flowers. For that, they died. When Grandma gave her death sentence, something clouded my soul; but for that cloud I had no name.

Time marched on, and then came the spider. Newly-married and an adult at least in theory, I awoke one morning to discover a spider much too close to the bed. I was terrified of spiders, but had been blessed in my youth with a mother who was not. Whenever a spider invaded my space as a child, I had only to call for my mother and she came and whisked it away, carefully taking it outside and releasing it. My mother, however, was not included in my current living arrangements, so I did the next best thing. I called for my husband. Being the dutiful husband that he was, David came rushing to my rescue. Squash. No more spider. He looked pleased.

I was crushed. I didn't mean for it to die. Something again seemed wrong with the world and now with me. One of God's creatures had been squashed, simply because its difference from myself frightened me. The spider was no threat to me. It died simply because I didn't understand its beauty. It infringed on my comfort, and because I wouldn't touch it to carry it to safety, it died. David thought I was insane and left me to my thoughts. I remembered the woodchucks and felt somehow that I had sinned, although I had no real sense of why.

Time marched on, and then came the bee. I was home alone and it was in the bedroom. I was afraid of it, although I was not allergic to bee stings, and I debated whether to risk being stung to try to put it outside. Eventually I went downstairs, got some Raid, and sprayed it dead. And then I sobbed for about a half an hour. The dark cloud no longer came from someone else's action, but from my own. The cycle was complete, the sin was my own, but I still did not understand it.

Time marched on and we moved to Florida. Pest control commercials are omnipresent in the state with roaches the size of helicopters, and it was in watching one of those commercials that I found my answer. There was Joe Pest Control, a kindly man entering a house to do his job. But when he got inside, the man suddenly was transformed into this techno-warrior, an armored agent of destruction shooting up every scampering pest like a Storm Trooper on the Death Star. And finally, as I watched that commercial, I understood what had bothered me most about the woodchucks and the spider and the bee.

It came in the form of a question. "What right," thought I, "do we human beings have to simply obliterate everything in our environment that troubles us? It seems extreme to us to consider bugs as having importance, but is there Biblical support for our nonchalance?" If God is in fact real and present and author of all life, who am I to refuse to live among certain forms of it? Does the environment belong to me? We sang songs at church about God's eye being on the sparrow. Was it only birds? Didn't God make the cockroach? I do mean to ask God about that choice someday, but in the meantime it seemed to me that reasons for killing something that God made should extend beyond ugliness or fear of a little pain.

Is it really acceptable to take the habitat of creatures I don't like and force them to leave or die? I watched the commercial. "Pests," they are called. On which day of Creation did God make "pests," and when was it that God said, "Here is all the stuff I made. It's yours. Get rid of whatever you don't want." Was that really what we meant by stewardship?

I was really troubled. It was about more than bugs. It was about more than woodchucks. Somehow, we had appropriated for ourselves what belonged to God. "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein," sings the Psalmist in Psalm 24. Again in Psalm 50 we hear "Every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills." We are not owners of this world, but stewards, and the parables of Jesus often remind us that our job is to tend it until the owner should return to claim it. That is not how we lived. Finally, I understood, and then I began to make connections.

Whatever irritates us earns the label of "pest," and that label of "pest" has a tendency to creep up the food chain. From dandelions in the yard to ants at the picnic to mice in the barn to woodchucks in the garden to geese on the pond to deer in the cornfield to bears at the landfill, they all have earned the label "pest," a label that carries with it the permission to exterminate. Is it really such a large step to move from there to pesky children who need to much, to Native Americans who occupy land we want, to the poor who are always needing attention, to people of color who want white people to do the hard work of dismantling racism? I think not.

I want to be clear that I do not think that pulling up a weed wrapped maliciously around your azaleas or squashing a bug is equal in atrocity to racism or the obliteration of Native Americans. I don't think it is sinful to take measures to help your home remain disease free or with trying to find ways to live more safely in a dangerous environment. But I do think that the attitudes that are manifested in our pest control commercials are the tiny seeds of the larger evils. Occasionally a child will see through the veil. At a Blessing of the Animals, one child brought me a tiny bug to be blessed. She didn't know what it was. It wasn't a pet. She had just seen it crawling along on the ground and figured it needed blessing. How right she was. A different child brought a large white rat and held it lovingly as I patted its head and asked for God's blessing. They could see the truth. God owns the ants in a thousand valleys as well as the cattle on a thousand hills. They are not "pests." They have their purpose and their place.

In many parts of our nation we are trying to decide whether the label "pest" should be bumped up another notch. We are trying to decide whether predators like wolves and panthers should be reintroduced into habitats where they once flourished. If we consider only the human point of view, the issue of predator reintroduction is difficult if not impossible to resolve. The interests of environment and ecology generally stand in direct opposition to those of business and industry. Wolves and panthers have not gone through some sort of 12-step program for recovering carnivores. As a wise person once said, "If you want the lion to lie down with the lamb, you're going to have to keep replacing the lamb." If wolves and panthers again live among us, they will eat sheep and cows and probably the occasional human being. I will not try to convince anybody that living with predators will be just as safe as living without them.

I support the reintroduction, however, because I believe that there are spiritual lessons at stake that we can learn in no other way. For starters, if all the predators are gone, who will remind us that we are not God? It is easy to remember that you are not God when a panther drops on you. You are much less likely to imagine that you are more clever than God when you can't manage to second guess a wolf coming after your sheep or even keep ants off of the picnic table. Paul prayed that his "thorn in the flesh" might be removed. God said no...live with the pest...it is good for your soul.

I do not want to take an extreme stance and say that all business concerns are wrong, or that we sin in trying to protect ourselves. The environmentalist can be just as far off base as the industrialist. What we need is not nature OR human endeavor, but a balance between the two. God was the one, after all, who provided Adam and Eve with skins for clothing. As we ask ranchers and homeowners to live with natural predators, we must also be willing to ask nature to live with its predators, human beings. Our task is not elimination of one or the other, but respectful co-existence.

And maybe if we learned to somehow live with the “pests,” we could keep ourselves from the escalation of our greed into the realm of atrocity. If, when we decide we want to live in the woods, we recognize that the wolves, bears, and other creatures already living there are God’s beloved property, perhaps we might not feel so free to exterminate them. If, when we expand our territory into an already-inhabited area, we recognize that those already inhabiting the land are God’s children, we would not feel so free to exterminate them. I am convinced that the issues are related.

Living with the predators, with the pests, with the weeds and woodchucks, with the wolves and alligators, is, ultimately, our practice for living with a full rainbow of others in the Kingdom of God. How to balance our personal risk with the stewardship of God’s creation is the same challenge as learning the balance between loving ourselves as we love our neighbors.

That is what my heart knew when I heard the blast of my father’s gun. If a woodchuck could be shot with impunity because it’s natural desire for appropriate food was in conflict with a stronger creature’s desire for an unspoiled garden, someone could justify shooting me if my legitimate needs interfered with theirs. I knew the woodchucks were innocent; I knew I was innocent; and my heart was learning that I lived in a world where innocence was no protection from violence. People had forgotten we belonged to God.

Maybe someday we will once again hear the voice of the child. The voice that wants to bless a bug, pet a rat, or save a woodchuck, might just one day save the world.