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Never Cry Wolf

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In 1948, a then young employee of the Canadian government's wildlife department was sent into the midst of wolves. His mission was to find biological evidence that the wolves were responsible for a perceived decline in the caribou population in the Canadian wilderness. But he wasn't exactly a by the book scientist, which has both helped and caused controversy for what Farley Mowat did discover during his time among the wolves. Mowat tells about his adventure among the wolves and the people of the arctic wilderness in his book, *Never Cry Wolf*, which was published in 1963, and twenty years later adapted into a movie with the same title.

Using his gifts of humor, observation skills, engaging writing style, and reasoning, Mowat's book is a captivating account that didn't do what he first intended it to do. Mowat wrote that his original intention was to poke fun at the government who organized the study, and anyone who has worked for an institution could probably relate to the sometimes-humorous situations that arise when you are working for an institution. However, as Farley Mowat faced the challenges of his study with what was then considered revolutionary and unorthodox methodology, he ended up finding a truth humanity had forgotten, a truth that has helped broaden the field of biology and humanity's responsibility as stewards of the complex and beautiful creation we inhabit.

Instead of killing wolves and dissecting the dead animals to find evidence of wolves killing caribou, which was standard operating procedure at the time, Mowat observed the wolves in their habitat. He discovered they survived eating mostly small mammals like mice and rabbits, even choosing to do so when caribou were available, and the caribou they did kill were elderly or sick, which meant the wolves were keeping the caribou herd healthy. He also met some of the indigenous people of the arctic and listened to their perspective of what was happening in their environment. The problems of the caribou, he claimed, were not so easily scapegoated to the wolves. In fact, the problems of the caribou were more connected to human activities like game hunting by tourists. Because his findings challenged the established way science conducted itself, his work was considered unscientific and was written off by many respected scientists at the time, some of whom tried to discredit Mowat's observations, which by the way, have been substantiated in the years that followed.

His findings also challenged commonly held frightening stereotypes and misconceptions of wolves as vicious killers hungry for human flesh that were mostly based on fairy tales. He admits there can be conflict with wolves and ranchers'

livestock, but advocated for a solution other than eradicating the wolves as they are an important part of a whole ecosystem, what today we would call a “keystone species,” and a necessary component for the welfare of us all.

While many of us today might find it hard to believe Mowat’s views were considered so radical and offensive at the time, his book *Never Cry Wolf* did help open the minds of many people around the world to considering that perhaps there was more to wolves than what fairy tales say. Today, the once endangered wolf populations in the United States and Canada are improving, some areas better than others, as the old stereotype is still hard to overcome in some places. But, more importantly, science has been expanded to recognize the validity, if still challenging contribution of observing animals in their native habitats in order to learn about them.

*Never Cry Wolf*, and many of Farley Mowat’s other books, were some of my absolute favorites when I was a teenager passionately advocating for environmental awareness and conservation; so, it would be understandable if I told you I cringed a little bit when I read the part of today’s Gospel where Jesus told his disciples that he was sending them out like sheep among wolves. At first glance, it seems Jesus, or at least the author of Matthew’s Gospel, is using the negative stereotype of the wolf to make a theological point. It seems a shame that such a good point should come at such a cost.

But maybe there is more to what Jesus was saying, especially when we look at the rest of the long Gospel reading for today. There was actually a lot of directions given for those followers of Jesus who Jesus was sending away from himself and into the world. That had to be a frightening or at least intimidating calling. Up till that point, it had been the job of the disciples to follow Jesus, let him make all the decisions about which road to take, where to camp for the night, how to approach a town or a person, how to respond to a challenge, what to do in each situation they faced. All they had to do was follow behind him, relax and enjoy the ride while they hopefully learned something. Now Jesus was sending them out on their own, to do something pretty important, and what they did and what they said, even how they traveled, would tell the People of Israel of the time what was going on.

Notice, this is not the like the Great Commission we heard last week; Jesus isn’t sending them out to all nations to make disciples or baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Instead, Jesus is up to something, and he is using his disciples to help tell the people of Israel that the time has come, the Messiah they had been waiting for is among them. Scholars tell us this because that is why Jesus told his disciples to stay out of Gentile country at this time, because he wanted to see if his own people would recognize what was going on. That also explains all the details Jesus

gave about what they could bring or not bring and what they were supposed to do: they were to show the world the Messiah was among them by bringing healing and forgiveness to the people of Israel, not money or stuff. If the people didn't see, or accept them, the disciples were to shake the dust from their feet, which was believed to be a symbol of leaving a pagan land before entering a holy land.

So, if Jesus' words to his disciples were only for a certain time and place, then it would be too easy to say today's Gospel doesn't apply to us sitting here today. But I believe there is more to it than just history; there is what we who follow Jesus today can observe and apply from the reading. And that is where my fondness for the writings of Farley Mowat come in. Because Jesus also told his disciples to go out, like sheep among the wolves, by being as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. Not a lot has been said about what such advice should look like in our modern lives. Serpents, like wolves, often are not perceived as good or wholesome examples to follow. After all, it was serpent that tricked Eve into eating that fruit. But perhaps we aren't to follow the stereotypes of such creatures and are to apply the words differently. After all, snakes also play an important part in the ecosystem.

We hadn't been in Athens long when my family and I discovered we share our property with a black snake. We did some research and learned these snakes are not poisonous, so there is no need to be afraid of them, and their food source is rodents, such as mice and moles, both of which are problematic on our property. So, we realized the black snake is a good neighbor to have around, regardless how anyone of us might feel about it, because that snake actually makes our home better for us, by helping keep the rodent population at bay. When we can, we watch the snake, and observe its rounds, how it, too is an observer, with no ill intention other than its own survival.

Perhaps when Jesus was talking about being wise as serpents and innocent as doves, he didn't mean being naive or clever or some combination which could come across as being manipulative or trying to push our agenda on someone who doesn't want to hear it. Perhaps what the author of Matthew's Gospel was suggesting by having Jesus give such advice was really advising those followers of Jesus then and now to go out into the world more like how Farley Mowat went out into the Canadian wilderness, to observe and let what he was watching, the wolves, observe him, and learn from each other.

You see, scholars also tell us, the wolves in Matthew's Gospel probably referred to the religious establishment that had sided with the Roman empire as a way to survive. Which means it was highly unlikely they were going to be very receptive to Jesus or his followers. And while that is helpful as historical perspective, it can also be

helpful today as the reminder that not everyone we vilify is a clear-cut villain. There is always more to a person and an institution, just as there is more to wolves, and sometimes the way to see more of the whole story is to first watch, learn, and represent yourself as best you can while you do.

This perspective could be very helpful when we think about the people in the world around us, the ones all those survey takers like Pew Research and Barna Group are so eager to tell us about to help explain the decline in church participation. Now I am not saying data isn't helpful, it can be, but perhaps it is more important and more helpful to go into the world equal parts observers and participants, to watch and listen and learn. Instead of assuming we know who our neighbors are we could let them tell us, by watching and listening, by being present and at the same time, let them know who we are, as the loving Christ-like individuals I know you to be, and the place of welcome Church of the Good Shepherd is. Perhaps, like Farley Mowat, when we engage in that wise and innocent combination of observation and being present, we will discover ourselves growing more in love with our community and feel the holy present in such love. Which could, as it did for Farley Mowat, lead to important self-discovery just as much as it could lead to learning about the community around us. And when we embrace such discovery with the love of God, that is when the miracles we called to be a part of happen.