



Growing up on a farm, there were quite a few animals around: a dog was usually in the house, cats roamed in the garage and beyond, and for many of my younger years, out in the barn, there were cows and pigs, even a goat, along the way. And, as a child, all those animals, including the often-filthy and most stubborn pigs, were cute and precious to me. It's almost as if I was under the impression they were part of our extended family. I

developed relationships with them. Conversations ensued with the farm life, as if they were treasured friends. In due time, I became part of a local 4-H group and ended up taking some of those cows and pigs to the county fair. They became an essential responsibility for me: wonderful creatures I needed to take care of with feedings and cleaning up after them. Of course, part of the complication with those meaningful connections developed was getting rather close with them, and at my younger somewhat naïve age, I often refused to accept that they could not exactly live in our backyard barn forever.

Now, I know none of this has anything to do with the main emphasis of all these Scripture readings this morning, but I just could not help but be taken aback by the nonchalant-ness of what happens in the first reading to animals that I am quite certain my younger self could get rather close to: “[Elisha] returned from following [Elijah], took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.” No big deal. It's just a natural part of the world. It happens. Elisha moves on and goes to work.

It reminded me of my first experience with mortality. It wasn't at a funeral home or a hospital, but in our backyard. I'm sure it was nothing more than young naïve me being at the wrong place, at the wrong time, as I watched one of our larger cows taken into a trailer, and let's just say...the cow did not make it back to the barn. It was complicated with those meaningful connections developed with the animals: getting rather close with them, all while often refusing to accept that they could not exactly live in our backyard barn forever.

Yes, I know this is not the anywhere near the main point of these Scripture readings about being set free to pour your whole heart into service in the world to the glory of God, but part of that ministry in which we are called as the living disciples of Christ is getting rather close to people and developing meaningful connections to the point that it can get rather complicated just how close we get. After all, we cannot bear to see our dear siblings in Christ endure pain. It not only hurts them; it hurts us, too. It gets even more complicated when we want to do so much to help that person, but we don't always know what to do in terms of what questions we can ask, or what can we offer to bring them at their home or the hospital, or whatever else. We also may not have the time or energy, ourselves, to do as much as we would like to be there for our treasured loved one. These world-shaping relationships with our family in Christ can get rather complicated, including our sometimes-stubborn refusal to accept that they cannot exactly live in the backyard of our life forever.

And when that time comes, it's almost as if that precious life is reduced to a nonchalantly written obituary: as if our treasured loved one was not meant to last forever; as if we are to simply accept it and move on, and get back to our needed work as the still-living disciples of Christ, developing more connections and relationships, knowing full well there will be more complications with just how much we care for our extended family in Christ. However, they are rather beautiful complications, to say the least.

I remember that first cow I took to the county fair, the one which I had to learn responsibility and dedication and a certain level of caring beyond myself. It wasn't always fun, to put it mildly, getting up early in the morning to feed a young cow and clean up his home, but they were precious complications, nonetheless, to experience a different kind of friendship and connection with a precious creature and the beautiful surrounding Creation as a whole, and even to the Creator who set it all in motion. The God who set this most captivating family in Christ in motion as well, so that we may experience the relationships that last a lifetime and then some. The God who knew full well there would be complications not only between us, but it would be complicated for God, too.

Because, yes, we are set free to pour out our whole heart in service in this world to the glory of God, but we are also set free to make some not-so-beneficial choices for the ones we love. We are set free to make mistakes and fall short of that glory of God. Except, time and time again, this God insists on staying in the midst of our homes in our very heart. It may seem so nonchalant about this God's constant grace, always offering forgiveness, never stopping from unleashing new life for us to enjoy and thrive. It seems too easy: that we must need to engage in more complicated work to earn it, but that's not how this God operates. It's not so complicated, evidently: you are loved. You are treasured in the eyes of God. You are part of a family in Christ that reaches the ends of the earth and beyond. You are a holy part of God's most precious stubbornness: refusing to accept that absolutely anything in this life, even death itself, can ever separate you from God's never-ending love in Christ Jesus, our Lord, now and forevermore. It's not so complicated, after all: it's simply the Greatest News that will never be taken away from us and from the whole world. And for that, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

*Image: from BBC.com*