

The Animals Will Teach Us

Job 12:7-10, Matthew 6:25-26

October 9, 2022 Blessing of the Pets

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"But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of God has done this? In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being." Job 12:7-10

Jesus said, "Therefore, I say to you, don't worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll drink, or about your body, what you'll wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet the Holy One feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are?"

Matthew 6:25-26

This is probably a first – multiple dogs, cats and other pets in this sanctuary during a worship service. Exciting, amazing, for some shocking, for some natural. We gather in this space and on line each week to deepen our awareness of God's presence, the Divine Mystery, in our lives and the world. We are connected in silence and song, in ancient scriptures and new stories, to the Source of Love and to one another. And for many of us, our pets are part of who we are, our families, our home. So if you have heard me say, "Remember to invite your family and friends to church," you may have thought, "But does she really mean my furry family members?" Yes.

Today as a church we are focusing people's relationships with animals and what this can teach us about our spiritual lives. We thank God for our pets, and for creatures great and small. It is a day to be more aware of the animals with whom we share the planet and maybe even our homes and hearts.

I know for some, animals or specifically pets are not very important. Or you may be allergic. You may even be annoyed when visiting a family member or friends who dote on their four legged companions. But today I invite all of us, whether we are dog people or cat people or horse people or bird people or not pet people at all to reflect on God's creatures.

In the book of Job, there is a lively discussion even argument between Job and God. Job has lost everything and is questioning God and God's purposes on every level. In this ancient story, God teaches Job that his theology, his world view is too small. He must expand his understanding of how the Holy One moves in the cosmos, on the earth and even through animals of every size. Where will wisdom come from to face challenges of life? God says,

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you."

Yes, yes there is much to learn when we observe animals and understand what scientists learn about so many amazing aspects of survival, bonding, migration, adaptation and more.

One Christian who understood this deep connection with animals was Francis of Assisi. He was born 1181 born in Italy to a prosperous silk merchant. Early on in his life, he had compassion for the poor and renounced his wealth. He restored small chapels that were in ruins and he took to nursing lepers, in the houses near Assisi.

He believed that nature itself was the mirror of God. He called all creatures his "brothers" and "sisters", and even preached to the birds. There is a story, a legend that he spoke to and persuaded a wolf in Gubbio to stop attacking some locals if they agreed to feed the wolf.

At Greccio near Assisi, around 1220, Francis celebrated Christmas by setting up the first known or crèche (Nativity scene). His nativity imagery reflected the scene in traditional paintings. He used real animals to create a living scene so that the worshipers could contemplate the birth of the child Jesus in a direct way. Animals there in the midst of this sacred moment because they too are sacred.

I don't know the history of how the legacy of Francis of Assisi evolved into a Blessing of the Animals, but it has grown over the recent decades. Catholic and Episcopal churches and now more Presbyterian and Protestant churches.

When we were living in New Jersey, many friends told me about a large annual event. It is a blocks-long, unlikely procession of animals. A camel, rare birds, snakes, monkeys, llamas, dogs and cats – lots of dogs and cats – weasels and donkeys, cows and an elephant, and many, many more wonderful representatives of God's creatures. It looks like Noah's Ark. It is the annual Parade and Blessing of the Animals held at St. John the Divine, Manhattan's Episcopal Cathedral on the first Sunday of October.

Annually, 4,000 people and as many creatures, line up for blocks and blocks, waiting to participate. This is the largest such Christian ceremony on earth. St. John the Divine holds this annual event in honor of the feast day for Francis of Assisi. The highlight of the Blessing of the Animals at St. John the Divine is the long procession when, one by one, humans and creatures – large and small, furry and hairy, cloven-hoofed and pawed – march through the bronze doors of the Cathedral, into the grand Gothic nave and up the center aisle. There, each creature is blessed by the bishop. A celebration of the diversity of God's creatures and pets and the relationships of love, devotion and comfort.

Animals and pets can be blessings in particular ways. What spiritual and life lessons have you learned? What are some of the unique ways pets offer a fullness of life?

I am grateful for the work of the Guide Dogs here in San Rafael. What an amazing life giving relationship a person who is blind or sight impaired can have with their seeing eye dog. Our son Josh was a puppy raiser in NJ with the Seeing Eye organization. Josh learned about training, discipline and joy with Elliott. Elliott loved him and he loved Elliott, but he knew it was a relationship that was not forever. Elliott went on to graduate and now travels the world with an amazing man who trains doctors and nurses.

I am grateful for Canine Companions who assist people with limited mobility. In my first church Karin has cerebral palsy and had an amazing CC dog named Kennedy. Kennedy was regularly in church and was heard on occasion to be snoring during sermon.

There are horses that are therapy for children and adults. Horses can offer a relationship that is healing. It is clear there is a spiritual connection.

- I was reading about the ways animals can lower blood pressure and calm people. There is a growing understanding of the importance of pet therapy in hospitals and nursing homes and older adult communities. Loving animals improve our health and a sense of peace.

- Learned about programs where children read with a dog next to them. Some children can concentrate better if they have a dog next to them. The children are not embarrassed if they make a mistake. Dogs don't judge. Children read better as they pet the dog.

On a more personal note, I have come to appreciate my love for animals, but Jeffrey has an even deeper connection to dogs. We have had 4 golden retrievers – Golden, Chase, Sophia and now Gracie. There is a connection of joy, of unconditional love. I have heard some of you describe cats that nuzzle and purr and offer that calming presence as well as playful.

As our companions, our furry pets have much to teach us about listening, openness, touch and sensitivity. Our pets enable us to touch, stroke, hug and hold without being ashamed or embarrassed. When in their company we are often more free with our feelings than we are with other humans. They offer unconditional love.

In the blessing of the animals, we acknowledge our essential kinship with the grand assortment of creatures with whom we share God's good earth. In the blessing of the animals, we acknowledge and bless the myriad of and complex relationships between humankind and animal kind: whether the relationship is that of pet to a person or family, or that between a sight-impaired person and their seeing-eye dog. In blessing the animals we praise God our Creator for the gift of creatures who share our lives, who give us companionship, and who, in the words of Francis of Assisi, are, indeed, our brothers and sisters.

Today we will welcome and bless them. In our turn, we are richly blessed. Amen.