

Sermon: Pentecost 19 & Blessings of the Animals + St Francis.

For 8am congregation: I invite you to take your bulletins home and reflect upon the readings. If you want to discuss any of them with me in the days ahead, please feel free to do that. But I want to give today's sermon to the Blessings of the Animals and St Francis whom we intentionally honor on the nearest Sunday to the date the Church honors him, October 4.

Blessing animals has been something we do at Messiah and certainly I have been doing it every year on the nearest Sunday to October 4, the date St Francis of Assisi is honored. I have done it at churches too, at the cathedral in Minneapolis we did it on the Sunday afternoon and one year had some farm animals brought in but as the farmer charged a huge amount for bringing them for their celebratory 2-minute appearance we abandoned the idea in future years. I understand the cathedral of St John the Divine opens its huge front doors to welcome an elephant. I watched a u-tube of a service there but alas did not see an elephant but certainly saw a great many dogs and a few other creatures too. They were all there for their blessings. A reporter spoke with a lot of people lined up ready to go in and each family group or individual spoke of what a blessing their pet was to them. One couple said their dog was their granddaughter! The contented look on each dog's face showed that the owners were a blessing to the dog; they obviously were living mutually blessed by each other. The reporter asked some of them why they had come that day for this special service. They said that it was very important to them to receive a blessing from God upon their pet. I am sure you feel the same if you brought your pet today. At a different location I heard about a woman with 4 rescue dogs who said to the priest, "I lost my husband and my home. These dogs are all I have left, but we do have each other, and I am so very grateful for that. I guess the truth is we all need a blessing." She went on, "Maybe we bless each other along the way. Maybe these blessings are how God continues to be present in our lives."

In her lovely book "Gilead" Marilynne Robinson tells the story of the Rev. John Ames, a retired Presbyterian minister. It is as though he is telling it to his son. In one section he remembers as a boy trying to Baptize the cat. He was upset when the cat aware that the bowl of water was for him wriggled clean away and stayed away until well after the bowl of water was gone. Phew! I am sure little Bennett will not decide to run off before I can Baptize him! But sometime later after the debauched attempt by the boy at Baptism, he cuddled the cat. This is how that was described, decades later by the aged man:

"I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take Baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time."

Today is important for those of you with pets and I am happy to bless a picture you show me if you were not able to bring your pet here with you. You might ask how it is the Church remember to do this once each year on the first Sunday in October. That is the connection with St Francis of Assisi who died on October 4 in 1226, almost 800 years ago. Francis did not begin life, as far as we know with any strong connection to God's creatures. In fact, he was a wealthy merchant's son and lived the easy indolent life we are told. But as a young man he went off to fight in a war, for which he was obviously unprepared considering his early life. After fighting in a battle between Assisi and Perugia, Francis was captured and imprisoned for ransom. He spent nearly a year in prison — awaiting his father's payment — and, according to legend, began receiving visions from God. After his release from prison, Francis was a very different man, dangerously sick in both mind and body. Today we would say he had PTSD, but they had no such understanding back then, as far as we know. One day, as legend has it, while riding on a horse in the local countryside, Francis encountered a leper. Prior to the war, Francis would have run from the leper, but on this occasion, his behavior was very different. Viewing the leper as a symbol of moral conscience — or as Jesus incognito, according to some religious scholars — he embraced and kissed him, later describing the experience as a feeling of sweetness in his mouth. After this incident, Francis felt an indescribable freedom. His earlier lifestyle had lost all of its appeal. Some time later he was in the little church of San Damiano which was in a ruined state. He heard Jesus tell him to "rebuild his church." He took this to be a literal instruction rather than a spiritual one and sold some of his father's merchandise to fund the rebuilding. His heart was now set on following Our Lord. His furious father contacted the bishop and there was a confrontation in this little church. Francis was told to return his father's property. He threw the money on the floor and in addition tore off his expensive clothing, stripping naked in front of them. Tradition says that the bishop gave him his cloak to wear. With that, he upped and left them, never to return home.

He lived precariously accepting support from local people as he walked around preaching the Gospel to them. In time other men joined him and then a woman named Clare felt called to this life style and she started the Poor Clare Movement. Francis was known to preach wherever he went, and nature was very important to him, the sun, moon, stars too. His love for animals became widely known, there were those who poured scorn on him for this while others accepted and loved his ministry. The villagers of Gubbio were said to be very grateful that he showed them that by feeding the wolf that terrorized them the wolf would no longer attack and kill their children. Francis' embrace of Christ-like poverty was a radical notion at the time. The Christian church was tremendously rich, much like the people heading it, which concerned Francis and many others, who felt that the long-held apostolic ideals had eroded. Francis set out on a mission to restore Jesus Christ's own, original values to the now-decadent church. With his incredible charisma, he drew thousands of followers to him. They listened to Francis' sermons and joined in his way of life; his followers became known as Franciscan friars.

In 1224 Francis reportedly received a vision that left him with the stigmata of Christ — marks resembling the wounds Jesus Christ suffered when he was crucified, through his hands and the gaping lance wound in his side. This made Francis the first person to receive the holy

wounds of the stigmata. They would remain visible for the rest of his life. Because of his earlier work treating lepers, some believe that the wounds were actually symptoms of leprosy. He died at the age of 45 on October 3, 1226, and the Pope canonized him in 1228. The church uses October 4 as his feast day.

So, for you today, are you here especially because your pet will be blessed? Does the life of St. Francis inspire you? We have a beautiful prayer we will say today from our Book of Common Prayer which is attributed to him, and the hymn at Communion is also attributed to him. But he lived 800 years ago, and this is today. As far as I know you are not going round begging for food and shelter and living in abject poverty. In fact, he may have been very disappointed to have known that later Franciscans had and have monasteries and lived and still live a much less frugal lifestyle. But you can learn much from him, the importance of caring for God's creation, both the living creatures and the land on which they live. He knew nothing about climate change but understood that the lives of all creatures need to be respected.

In our readings Jesus reminded us that we should not focus all our energies on our own needs when there are so many other people to care for, and when there is our planet earth to care about. We want little Bennett here to be Baptized today, to have a nurturing planet home and not one which we as humans have destroyed because of our own greed and uncaring attitudes. Jesus reminded us that God created all the birds and they were and are important to God. Just think how wonderful birds are in their abilities to live, feed themselves, procreate, and migrate to different climates, without a GPS to guide them, and no google to answer any questions. Jesus showed us in his story of the Lost Sheep that God cares for all God's creatures just as God cares for you. You might be "lost" in your heart, in your head, in your relationships but God continues to care for you.

Remember always that God cares for all of God's creation. Remember also that God entrusts each of you to be a partner in the caring. And remember finally that God so loved the world – meaning all of God's creation - that he gave his only son so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life. This is true for today, tomorrow, and forever. Amen.

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