



First United Church of Oak Park

Blessing of the Animals

Luke 12:22-24

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“Apprehend God in all things,
for God is in all things.
Every single creature is full of God,
and is a book about God.
Every creature is a word of God.
If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature-
even a caterpillar-
I would never have to prepare a sermon
so full of God
is every creature.”

-Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Christian mystic

Consider the Birds

Consider the birds. Two of our Gospels record Jesus saying this. When we read the phrase in Matthew, we feel soothed by those sweet tiny heralds of the new day... hope-filled little creatures that remind us to sing. They are the tiny creatures children find injured and nurse back to health with eyedroppers. I feel much less anxious when I consider the birds.

But Luke gets more specific. Instead of “consider the birds,” Luke says, “Consider the raven.” Ravens aren’t cute and they don’t make me feel less anxious! When I lived in Berkeley, there was a particular way I would walk home and there was a raven who had learned my walk and, even if I was walking home in the midst of a crowd of people on the sidewalk, that raven would nosedive at me! It was terrifying. Also, ravens don’t sing—they caw in a loud, gravelly, menacing way. In many cultures, including our own, ravens are associated with death. We see ravens at Halloween and in horror films. Ravens are named several places in the Bible. The Book of Proverbs says that children who disobey their parents will have their eyes pecked out by ravens. So why does Jesus want us to “Consider the ravens,” and more importantly, why does Jesus think this will make us less anxious?

I wonder if it’s because we have a few things in common with the ravens. Ravens are really, really smart. They have an amazing capacity for learning and strong memories. The Book of Leviticus says that a raven brought food every morning and every night to Elijah when he was stranded in the desert. I wish my Berkeley raven had intended to offer me dinner on my way home instead of attacking me! Ravens have huge appetites. They require a lot of food. Some anthropologists suggest

that ravens and humans co-evolved, ravens learning to cooperate with other ravens and humans learning to cooperate with other humans in order to outsmart the other species in the fight for food.

So, consider the raven. Perhaps Jesus isn't so off the mark. If the paradoxical raven who is both loved and feared, who has the capacity for both good and evil, who has such an appetite that we call ourselves ravenous when we are hungry... perhaps if God provides enough for them to have their fill, maybe we can trust that God will provide enough for us, too.

Consider the Dogs

Consider the dogs. Is there an important life lesson that dogs *can't* teach us? I asked my Facebook friends to share lessons they've learned from animals and here are some of the lessons dog lovers shared...

- To forgive, let go, and move on!
- How to slow down and appreciate simple pleasures.
- It's good to take a nap.
- Play is important.
- Be with people who love you and you love.
- Eating at consistent times seems to be easier on the body.
- A good grooming can make your day.
- Patience.
- You can be a puppy at any age.
- Unlimited and unconditional love.
- How to be a comfort to those who are hurting.

Several people talked about dogs as comforters and healers. H-E-A healers, not just H-E-E heelers. We are not the first people to discover dogs are healing. But not everyone understands that.

There's a parable in the Book of Luke that includes dogs. There's a man named Lazarus lying outside a rich man's house, wounded. The rich man refused to help Lazarus or offer him anything to eat, despite having plenty to spare. The text says that as Lazarus lay outside the rich man's house, dogs would lick his wounds. The early church fathers interpreted the dogs' licks as medicinal and a sign of the care of another species, while modern biblical scholars have said it is a sign of just how disgusting Lazarus was. So much is lost when the story is read that way. Having a dog lick wounds was a medicinal practice, according to medical contemporaries of the Gospel of Luke. We know saliva, whether human or dog, was a common cure for ailments in the ancient world. Even Jesus used saliva to heal a blind man. It makes more sense to me that we would read the dogs in this parable as being there to ease Lazarus' pain, and I'll tell you why: Lazarus and the rich man both die and go to the afterlife, where the rich man is tormented. The last thing we hear about Lazarus' life on earth is that the dogs would come and lick his sores with their wet tongues. The first thing we hear about the rich man's experience of torment in the afterlife is that he wishes Lazarus would come and wet his tongue.

That wet dog tongue is a symbol of comfort and healing in this ancient story, and in so many of our lives today. Thanks be to God for the healing power of our canine companions.

Consider the Cats

Consider the cats. When I was born, our family included a dog and a cat. Byrdie was a good dog and Vashti was... her own cat. Vashti did not like me but tolerated me, and I loved her anyway. My bond with them was nice, but I learned about the bond between human and animal one Christmas morning when I was about six years old. I found a plain cardboard box in the living room. Timidly I asked what it was. My parents told me to open it. I cautiously opened the box and out hopped a tiny white kitten with no tail! She immediately ran across the room and bit my big brother on his big toe. I knew right then that I had an ally. Because of her toe biting, I decided to name her "Snuggles." I thought I was hilarious. My parents said, "Are you sure you don't want to name her Snowball or Snowflake, she's all white and you got her for Christmas." They didn't appreciate my humor. "No, her name is Snuggles."

Snuggles was mine. I had named her. She was my best friend. She let me carry her around the house like a baby on my hip, dress her in doll clothes, and she did, in fact, like to snuggle me. That Christmas, I had also received a book about her breed of cat. She was a Manx and the book was called "How the Manx Cat Lost Its Tail." It told the story of the Manx cat running late to get on Noah's ark, barely making it in as Noah slammed the door of the ark on the cat's tail. I loved my little Manx. Our bond was so strong that since then I have had two more Manx cats. Mabel was rescued in LA, and I drove five hours to a humane society in southern Illinois to pick up Jelly. That day when I chose Snuggles' name, a forever bond was formed.

Do you remember the Biblical stories of God creating the animals? There are two. In one version, God creates the world in seven days and there's a day for birds and fish and another day for all the land-based creatures. In the other, God creates the first man, called Adam, and God says, "it's not good for Adam to be alone. I will create helpers," and God creates the animals. The common interpretation of that story has gotten us in trouble. That interpretation is that God gave Adam dominion of the animals and the earth. But we need to give that story a second look, since it has been used to justify our destruction of the planet. There's something that happens in the story that might be a clue as to what kind of partnership God intended for Adam to have with the animals. The first thing God does after creating those animals is bring them to Adam for him to name them. Something happens when you give a person or an animal a name—a bond is formed. Naming isn't about dominating, it's about love. Parents name their children out of love—choosing names that hold beautiful meaning. And we name our pets out of love. When I named Snuggles, I knew I was her human, and she was my little buddy.

Joan Chittister says, "We know now that if human beings disappeared tomorrow, the existence of [the animals] wouldn't be affected at all. If animals disappeared on the other hand, human beings could not possibly live without them—as long as bees are needed even to pollinate so many plants." The paradox of that struck me... As human beings, we hold all the power to destroy every species, and yet, we are the most vulnerable... every species could survive without us, but we can't possibly

survive without them. God has given us power and vulnerability in equal measure. God has called us not to dominate, but to honor the animals and give them names; to partner with all of creation.

Thanks be to God for the many partnerships we will bless here today.