

Sermon for Sunday October 16 - Pet Sunday

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

I have been looking forward to this Sunday. In the past this Pet Sunday has been filled with gratitude, and laughter and just the right amount of holy chaos. The Spirit of God seems to dance among us and it feels like a Sunday when the welcome, we at McClure United Church are so desperate to live in the world, is made very real and perhaps put to the test a bit.

I have been looking forward to this Sunday too because for many it has been our pets that have kept us grounded through one of the most challenging of times.

They made Covid isolation just that much more manageable: when we could not touch others or be touched, they were the ones curled up in our lap or around our feet.

when we were frightened, they were our comfort.

For some pets were a constant source of laughter and silliness.

Our pets insisted on us taking a break from the news and they made us play or walk or well clean up.

Our pets have been a wonderful gift through difficult times and it is right and good for us to give thanks for them. Acknowledging and giving thanks for animals is not a new thing.

Saint Francis of Assisi lived in the late 12th century and into the first quarter of the 13th century. He was born wealthy and was expected to take over the family business of selling silk. Being of the upper classes, at the age of 19 through 23 he also served as a soldier. After a series of spiritual experiences, he began to follow in the way of Jesus. He took his commitment to Jesus way very seriously. Francis let go of power and wealth, and adopting a life of poverty and humility. He led a very simple life, grounded in the gospels and especially the Sermon on the Mount, and his way of following Jesus attracted others. This was the beginning of the Minor Brothers, better known as the Franciscans in the Catholic tradition.

Francis, they say talked to the animals - he believed they were creatures of God, like us. There is a story about Francis that goes:

One day, while Francis was traveling with some companions, they happened upon a place in the road where birds filled the trees on either side. Francis told his companions to; "wait for me while I go to preach to my sisters the birds." The birds surrounded him, intrigued by the power of his voice, and not one of them flew away.

Francis is often portrayed with a bird, typically in his hand. Like the one you see here.

Another story goes like this:

In the city of Gubbio, where Francis lived for some time, was a wolf "terrifying and ferocious, who devoured men as well as animals". Francis had compassion upon the townsfolk, and so he went up into the hills to find

the wolf. Soon, fear of the anima, caused all of his companions to flee, undeterred the saint pressed on. When he found the wolf, he made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to come to him and hurt no one. Miraculously the wolf closed his jaws and lay down at Francis' feet.

“Brother Wolf, you do much harm in these parts and you have done great evil”, said Francis. “All these people accuse you and curse you ... But brother wolf, I would like to make peace between you and the people.” Then Francis led the wolf into the town and surrounded by startled citizens made a pact between them and the wolf. Because the wolf had “done evil out of hunger”, the townsfolk were to feed the wolf regularly. In return, the wolf would no longer prey upon them or their flocks. In this manner Gubbio was freed from the menace of the predator. Francis even made a pact on behalf of the town dogs, that they would not bother the wolf again. Finally, to show the townspeople that they would not be harmed, Francis blessed the wolf.

Because of his association with animals, Francis is, among other things, the patron saint of the environmental movement.

Francis witnessed to the truth that all creation is God's, and so it is appropriate, if not critical for us to make time to bless all animals, including our pets. It is right for us to acknowledge and affirm our dependence and our responsibility for the care of God's creation. Given this past week and Premier Moe's “white paper”, it seems even more important that we clearly place the environment and God's creatures in front of us and recommit ourselves to the care of all God's creation.

Did you know that dogs are mentioned more than a dozen times in the Bible. Cats, not so much, perhaps because the little guys are associated with the Egyptians; the people who enslaved the Israelites. The Bible does however mention big cats, including leopards, and lions but they are not the soft and cuddly types we are blessed to share life with.

There are several origin, or creation stories, in the Bible and the one read today – a story written long ago by a people describing their experience of God in Creation is so very interesting. The writer of this story did not set aside the 6th day, just for the creation of humanity but rather saved the six day “for the creation of cows and creeping things and wild animals of every kind”. It was on the same day that cows were made that humanity was also created - a very effective way to remind us of humans that we are part of a complex unfolding of creation - we are not the pinnacle of it but rather a precious part of a precious whole. Sometimes in our arrogance we forget our place.

It is good for us this day to invite God’s blessing on these precious animals in our lives who are so woven into the fabric of our living. We bless the animals this day, because they already bless us with their presence and love - they reflect the Creator.

This is stated no better than in a song by the American Christian songwriter Wendy J. Francisco in her song *G O D and D O G*, so we’ll end with that.

I look up and I see God, I look down and see my dog.
Simple spelling G O D, same word backwards, D O G.

They would stay with me all day. I'm the one who walks away.
But both of them just wait for me, and dance at my return with glee.

Both love me no matter what – divine God and canine mutt.
I take it hard each time I fail, but God forgives, dog wags his tail.
God thought up and made the dog, dog reflects a part of God.
I've seen love from both sides now, it's everywhere, amen, bow wow.

I look up and I see God, I look down and see my dog.
And in my human frailty . . . I can't match their love for me.