

Woof!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, October 4, 2009: the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi.
Based on Matthew 11:25-30*

St. Bartholomew's Church is known for practicing "radical welcome." That may be truer at this service than at any other time. At this service, of course, we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis by inviting humans to bring their animal companions as special guests so that they can receive God's blessing. It's one of my favorite services in the church.

We have tried, as we do for human guests, to think ahead and plan for our guests' well-being here. The Youth of St. Bart's have brought doggie biscuits and kitty treats to share, and stand ready with paper towels for other eventualities. Our wonderful Facilities staff have thoughtfully placed bowls of water for our animal guests at the front doors, in the center aisle, and out in the cloister. As you can see, we have a hand-washing station here for clergy and anyone else who would like to wash their hands before we all gather around this table to share a holy meal together. And your preacher has prepared an especially short sermon.

St. Francis, as you may remember, lived some 800 years ago. Born into a wealthy Italian family, he refused to go into the family business; instead, he followed God's call to identify with the poor and outcast, particularly lepers. Others followed his example and his traveling preaching, quickly growing into what we know today as the Franciscan order.

Francis saw and praised God in everything around him: in humans, especially those rejected by others, in the natural world, and in animals. There are many wonderful stories about Francis preaching to his sisters the birds, Francis making peace with a ravenous wolf that threatened his town—stories immortalized in the garden statues of Francis with birds on his shoulder and animals at his feet. Francis was also a poet; he wrote the words to the Canticle you just heard our choir sing so beautifully: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Sister Earth. "Be praised my Lord for all thy love bestowed on us. Bless those who walk the way of peace." It's no wonder that Francis has become the patron saint of animals

and the environment. Eight hundred years later, he still reminds us that all living creatures and all creation are truly gifts from God—and that they reveal God to us, if we will just pay attention.

In the verses we heard from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has been healing in the larger towns of Galilee—the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear. The "wise and intelligent" of these towns, particularly the religious elite, don't "get it." But some of the "infants," the little ones, maybe those without such pride in themselves, their knowledge, their abilities, do get it: God's love and grace is revealed to them in the person of Jesus.

God's love and grace can be revealed to us in our relationship with our companion animals and with nature. This week I happened to catch parts of the 12-hour series on PBS, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea," by Ken Burns. It is excellent, and I commend it to you. It is full of stunning photography of some of the most stunning scenery in this country and the incredible variety of wildlife that live in these lands. Burns also tells stories of the political struggles and personal sacrifice and devotion that have gone into protecting these lands and their wildlife, and to restoring the natural ecological balance in them. I think St. Francis would have loved our national parks.

Watching this film, I thought of the animals that work for a living—the horses whose very labor made possible the settlement and growth of this country we live in. The companion animals who become the eyes for those who cannot see, or the legs for those who cannot walk. The cows and sheep and pigs and chickens and fish and more exotic creatures who give their lives so that we can have food and clothing and luxury items. The creatures who have been hunted to extinction, or those who struggle to survive in increasingly polluted waters or clear-cut land.

It's good to keep all these in mind, and reflect on what part we humans play in the balance of things, especially today as we celebrate the Feast of

St. Francis, with animals and creatures that are closer to home. Literally, those with us today live with us, as part of our families.

I don't have a pet now, and I think I'm poorer for that. When I think back on growing up with cats, dogs, parakeets, fish, turtles, I know without doubt that I am richer for having formed close relationships with these beings, for having had the fun of playing with them and—though I didn't think so at the time—for having had the responsibility of caring for them. My first pet, a tiny yellow kitten that I christened Muffin, and we fell in love with each other when I was five. The whole neighborhood conspired to bring us together. Muffin survived sibling tugs of war, being dressed in doll clothes and strolled in a doll carriage, and allowed me to carry him around on my hip like a baby. Amazingly, Muffin still loved me. He was probably relieved when I grew up and he got relatively more peace and quiet. When Muffin died eleven years later, our whole family grieved as we buried him in our back yard, with full honors.

These animal companions of ours can be real members of our families. They are different from us, and have different needs, which we must take into consideration. We have the responsibility of caring for them. This is not bad training for living a life in peace with others who are different from us. It's also not bad training for extending radical welcome! "The love we give to a pet, and receive from a pet, can draw us more deeply into the larger circle of life, into the wonder of our common relationship to our Creator."¹

1 Kevin E. Mackin, OFM, quoted in *Blessing the Animals*, ed. Lynn L Caruso, 2006.

Meister Eckhart, a German theologian and mystic who lived just a few years after St. Francis, advises us:

*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.*

Look around—at nature, at wildlife, at your animal companion.

Look at each other.

Look at yourself and within yourself.

See God's love revealed in all.

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*For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads
write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022,
or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.*