

All God's Critters
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – October 29, 2023

Please Read:
Psalm 148
Matthew 11:25-30

In the opening stories of creation in Genesis, God calls forth all living things. Originally, the animals were named by Adam and were meant to be companions for Adam, but Adam confesses only another human partner was adequate. Anyone who has had a beloved pet knows that our animal friends, dogs and cats, horses or even lizards and snakes, can become part of the family and feel like kindred spirits. Apparently, the term 'a dog is a man's best friend' was first used in 1789 by King Frederick of Prussia. He's claimed to say, "the only, absolute and best friend a man has in this selfish world, the only one that will not betray or deny him, is his Dog!"

I'm not so sure about that, but some people are "dog people" and some are "cat people." There's a funny story about the difference between dogs and cats at the gates of heaven. A German Shepherd arrives at the Pearly Gates and St. Peter from his throne, asks, "So why should I allow you into the Kingdom of Heaven?" to which the Shepherd replied in Germanic staccato, "I was a perfect guard dog for my master and always protected my family with zie highest attention to detail. They were always safe under my watchful eye." "Alright," St. Peter said. You may enter in... Next, a Golden Retriever showed up and St. Peter again from his throne, asked, "And why should I allow you into the Kingdom of heaven?" to which the Golden Retriever replied with exuberant enthusiasm, "I was always happy and loved to play 'Get the ball' with my master! I was always happy and loved to play 'catch the ball' with my master! I was always happy and loved to go swimming with my Master and licked his face constantly! I was always happy and always made my Master smile." "Alright," St. Peter said. "You may enter." Finally, a big Siamese cat showed up and St. Peter from his throne, asked, "So why should I allow you into the Kingdom of Heaven?" To which the cat paused thoughtfully, then dryly replied, "I have no idea, but I believe you're in my chair!"

Having had both dogs and cats as a part of our family, I think there may be some truth to that story. In fact, animals do have a special place in creation, and today we remember and ask God's blessings on them because they too, are beloved of God, and when we talk about stewardship, we can't help but include and remember the gift that animals and pets and even our stuffed animal friends are in our world.

In Psalm 148, the order of who is doing praise and glorification of God is important. Ten times in thirteen verses we read about praising God. First praise for the LORD

comes from the heavens in the heights, all God's angels the heavenly host. Then, the sun and moon and shining stars, and then, the waters above the heavens, and the sea monsters and all deeps, and fire and hail, snow and frost and stormy wind. Then, the mountains and all hills, fruit trees and cedars. Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds.... You see, we already have quite a cast giving praise from all creation! Only after all of that do we read, kings of the earth and people young and old alike are invited to join in the chorus of praise. In the ordering of the Psalmist, anyway, humans are invited into the praise of God only *after* the animals. Curious, even strange, isn't it?

St. Francis was one of the most famous saints known for talking with the animals, literally preaching to them. I would have liked to have some of those sermons today, as I'm not sure the critters gathered are much interested in what I have to say. St. Francis is the closest in the Christian tradition to native American spirituality, where all living things take their life from the Great Spirit. We believe that too but have forgotten it.

Did you know the original "kosher" food for Jews is vegetarian. You were only allowed to kill another living thing if no other food source was available, and of course that tradition is long forgotten. C. S. Lewis hints at this respect for all living things as in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, all the animals can talk and have the characteristics (good and bad) of *persons*.

So, why do we bless the animals here today? In the Christian tradition anyway, the custom traces back 800 years to St. Francis. The story goes that he was wandering around outdoors one warm afternoon, full of self-doubt, when he noticed a flock of birds in his path. He immediately felt the need to first talk to them as though they were his equals and then preach to them about God's glories and the reasons why men and animals should be grateful for these blessings. One might say that this was also the beginning of the environmental movement since Francis recognized how human beings are intrinsically connected to all of creation.

Today, some churches celebrate Reformation Sunday, as though we fixed things in the 16th century. I'm more inclined toward a Lament, as we have thousands of splinter denominations and our division, sometimes bitter, is not something to celebrate. You've heard me mention Phylis Tickle before. The late author and speaker once remarked that every 500 years or so the church has a yard sale and needs to get rid of stuff that isn't really useful anymore. Clear house a bit.

Perhaps we are in a period of transition where we need to pay more attention to Creation, and the need to be better stewards of all of life? Perhaps we need to give thanks to God for all God's critters, and the joy and friendship they share with us. I'm still not quite sure what our son Christopher saw in his corn snake who unleashed all kinds of shrieking chaos when he got loose on bath day one time? But our dogs, cats, rabbits, and other animals – even the few beehives I “keep,” remind me that all of life is precious and a gift. Perhaps even our little Guiney pigs and gerbils remind us just how fragile life really is, and how important it is that we learn to take better care of the wonderful diversity of creation? Indeed, we are called by God to be stewards of all of life and to protect and seek the peace and welfare of all living creatures...

It seems to me we can learn from the animals in that they don't try to be more or less than they are. They only take what they need. Nothing more, nothing less. Perhaps I make too much of this, but as diverse as all of the animal world is, each living creature lives its life with a simple assurance, “This is who I am, and I will be me.” Perhaps we can learn from their simple self-acceptance and self-realization. Accept who we are. Don't try to be someone else!

When Jesus invites us to bring to him all of our burdens, we can always do so in prayer. I don't know about you, but sometimes I have found myself secretly talking to my pets, as they can play the role of a good listener. No judgment. No critique. No argument. They just listen. I know we can see the face of Jesus in our neighbor but wonder if perhaps we can't see Jesus also in the face of our beloved pets?!

Either way, today we bless the animals, because they are a blessing to us. And God promises to redeem all of creation. I think that really means *all* of creation. And perhaps we need to remember that being the church reformed and always reforming means getting on board with better stewardship of all creation? In the meantime, may we join with all creation to praise the Lord, to give thanks for the precious gift of life in all God's critters great and small.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.