

Keeping Us

Whitefish UMC

October 2, 2011

Psalm 148; Matthew 11:25-30

- † We named our puppy after Francis of Assisi—her name is Francie, and she is here today, along with your beloved pets and creatures. Wherever we go, people love Francie. They cuddle her, smell her, and generally act like besotted, googley-eyed teenagers infatuated for the first time. It fits, really.
- † Because everyone loved Francis, (our Francie’s namesake) it seemed. He was charming, loved to treat his friends to drinks in the local taverns, and had a way with the ladies. Like other young men of the noble class, Francis went off to war. In the thirteenth century, the city states of Italy regularly called their citizens to one battle or another.
- † While in prison after being captured by the enemy, Francis experienced a spiritual awakening, and soon the jolly young man gave up his privileged life, alienating himself from his family and many peers, in order to serve the poor and outcast and in order to glorify God.
- † Francis experienced an overwhelming sense of awe that God would become flesh, dwell among us, and willingly die for the love of humanity. The suffering of Christ evoked passion in Francis—so much so that Francis is said to have come the closest of any human in history to a true imitation of Christ.

- † As Francis began to contemplate the delicate nature of human freedom, he noticed that the creatures around him were less free than he was. They seemed to obey the will of the creator perfectly.
- † While he sensed periodic inhumanity in himself, he never sensed that same betrayal of nature with other creatures. He became fascinated again and again, inspired by them.
- † Francis sought to understand his own nature, created in the image of God, that he might obey it as the animals obeyed their nature. He blessed them for their beauty and obedience. They taught him, and led him to seek God's will for his own life.
- † We honor Francis for many reasons, but today we remember him because of his love and joy for all creatures, including all of the children of God. Some Christians even go so far as to say that Francis' love for all creatures, for the connection between people and animals, is a sign that points to God.
- † A hundred years later, Meister Eckhardt, the German mystic, said something like that as well: "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 tinniest creature - even a caterpillar - I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature."
- † How does our friendship with animals help us understand God better? Believe it or not, the Bible is full of passages that point us in this direction. Consider Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3:⁹For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over

the animals; for all is vanity. ²⁰All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

- † Or this one, from Job, Chapter 12... You have only to ask the cattle, for them to instruct you, and the birds of the sky, for them to inform you. The creeping things of earth will give you lessons, and the fish of the sea provide you an explanation: there is not one such creature but will know that the hand of God has arranged things like this! In God's hand is the soul of every living thing and the breath of every human being!

- † Poets, composers, and artists affirm the biblical stories as well. Mary Oliver, one of my favorite poets, has written a poem whose title is almost as long as the poem: "Watching a Documentary about Polar Bears Trying to Survive on the Melting Ice Floes." The poem goes like this, "That God has a plan, I do not doubt. What if His plan was, that we could do better?"

- † St. Francis, according to legend, echoes these ideas in a legendary story about the wolf of Gubbio. The people of Gubbio had been terrorized by a wolf who used to come to their village and attack the villagers. He was a ravenous beast, and the people finally got tired living in fear and called on St. Francis for help, as he had the reputation of being able to talk to animals. They sent a delegation to St. Francis and instructed him that he should tell the wolf that there is a commandment against killing. They told St. Francis to tell the wolf to move to someone else's city.

- † Francis went into the forest to meet the beast, addressing it as "Brother Wolf." He had a nice talk with the wolf and convinced him to stop attacking and killing the townspeople of Gubbio. There is a moment (often depicted in icons of the saint) where the wolf comes forward and puts his paw in Francis' s hand in a gesture of covenant. Then Francis returned to the town square. "My good people of Gubbio," he told them "The wolf has been converted, but there is something you must do to assure he will not revert to his old ways. You must feed your wolf."
- † The people are very angry to hear this, but they do feed the wolf, and the killing stops. (adapted from Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, 498 and other sources).
- † Of course there are a variety of ways "to feed your wolf." Sometimes feeding the wolf involves managing its population numbers and habitat. That's why Francis' love for animals extends to all of creation, diverse and different and wild as it may be.
- † One of the things we learn from our friendships with animals is that real love does not depend on similarity. Love can cross the boundary between species and unite beings who are fundamentally different from one another; a horse and a boy or a girl; a cat and an older man; a poodle and a middle-aged widow.
- † We see that those small miracles of love between two fundamentally different beings are little models of the great love that connects us

with God. When you think about it, God is even more different from us than the animals are.

- † After all, we and the animals are all creatures; God alone is the Creator. We and the animals all have limitations—but God’s power and presence extends through the whole universe.
- † We humans, though created in the image of God, fail to fulfill our divine purpose when we sin—when we do things that hurt ourselves and others, deliberately or not.
- † But God’s life is perfect, perfect love, unscarred by failure and sin. If then God is so different from us, how can we dare to say that God is close to us, that God loves us and we love God?
- † We Christians say that in Jesus, God comes to us as a friend and a brother—but he is more than that. St. Augustine said that God is closer to me than I am to myself. How could that possibly be true?
- † Our scripture for today, Matthew 11:25-30, speaks of the truth that we adults know when we observe our children. Like the animals, children sometimes have more wisdom about the nature of love and relationship than we adults do.
- † We adults like to focus more on difference than on what we have in common. But once in a while we get it right. We bring children to sing in hospitals and nursing homes. It’s a common practice for assisted living facilities and rehabilitation centers to welcome pets.
- † Why? Because they teach us about a love that leaps over the barriers of age, health, wealth, and even species.
- † Look into the eyes of your pet. Look into the eyes of your child, your grandchild, your niece, your nephew—your neighbor. Think about the miracle of love that binds us to one another.

† And give thanks for the miracle of love that binds each of us frail creatures to the great Lord of Life.

† Amen.

Sources: Duke Chapel website: www.chapel.duke.edu/worship