

Homily – Francis and the Animals

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Today we are celebrating and remembering the wonder that was St. Francis of Assisi, a thirteenth century mystic and teacher from Italy. And because of the special association between Francis and critters, we make special welcome today to the well-behaved pets and animals who have joined us. Their presence with us makes our worship of God very special for I believe that like us, our pets are in relationship with God, and perhaps we can learn something about God from these creatures.

But first, in today's Gospel reading Jesus lifts up infants as those from whom the wise and the intelligent can learn. One of the characteristics of infants is that they are often seen, especially in the spiritual sense, as innocent. In his essay "The Recovery of Paradise" Thomas Merton writes of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and their search for lost innocence. These third century Christian mystics saw innocence as the emptiness and purity of heart "which had belonged to Adam and Eve when they were still in the Garden Eden. After leaving Eden, and being no longer innocent, Adam and Eve sought paradise in the recovery of that 'unity' which had been shattered by the 'knowledge of good and evil.'" This unity that had been lost was, as the Desert Fathers and Mothers saw it, the unity of being one with Christ. This is a goal that we all have, being one with Christ.

In the Gospels Jesus teaches us that the gift of being like a child is vital and necessary for entry to the kingdom and being one with Christ. This extraordinary teaching is consistent in the three synoptic gospels but the meaning of the teaching is less clear. In fact the mystery of what it might all mean is revealed only to babies and toddlers, in other words those who are not yet able to speak. But here is the message. In order for us to see and to be close to God, we have to relinquish the part of us that feels important and knowledgeable as a grown-up and turn to God in a state of not-knowing. As I said last week, when we let go, empty ourselves, and surrender to God, we are putting on the mind of Christ.

Now, I want to use a quote from the 14th century theologian, Meister Eckhart to show another way to put on the mind of Christ. In his sermon on Sirach, Meister Eckhart wrote, "A person who knew nothing but creatures would never need to attend to any sermons, for every creature is full of God and is a book." Every creature is full of God and is a book.

That makes me smile. Each and every creature is a unique work of God, with its own message, its own metaphor, its own energetic style, and its own way of showing forth goodness, beauty, and participation in the Great Mystery. Each creature has its own

glow and its own unique glory. To be a contemplative is to be able to see each of these creatures as an epiphany, to enjoy them, to protect them, and to draw upon them as a work of God.

And, living close to nature as he did, St. Francis of Assisi could see Christ in every animal he encountered. He is quoted as talking to or about rabbits, bees, larks, falcons, lambs, pigs, fish, cicadas, waterfowl, doves, and the famous wolf of Gubbio. And it is not just the diversity of creatures that is a blessing of God. Those of you who love dogs know that each individual dog is uniquely gifted by God and blesses our lives in special ways. Their unconditional love, forgiveness, and loyalty show us what God is like. That is a gift that we have from our friends who are here with us today. It is also a gift from those animals we left home today because they would hate being here.

Now, I really think human beings need someone to love, someone to awaken us to the flow of love and to keep that flow going. I can understand why so many people have adopted pets to ease their isolation. I often wonder if there doesn't have to be an object whose goodness, truth, and beauty draw us out of ourselves. That someone doesn't even have to be human. It can be an animal to whom we give ourselves and through whom we feel ourselves given back. And, remember, our English word animal comes from the Latin word for "soul" or anima. Animals are ensouled ones!

Maybe you've had this experience with your own pet, but our dog, Ben, has an amazing ability to make eye contact. Each morning he sits at the side of my bed and just looks at me. Dogs just keep gazing at us with their very "soulful" eyes. And I wonder: What does he see? What does he think? What is it that he genuinely seems to like in me? They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. I'm convinced these beings that we thought lived at a rudimentary level of consciousness can see the one thing necessary: love. They don't get lost in labeling and categorizing. Maybe that's why they can maintain the flow of love, often unconditionally.

And this love is not just limited to dogs. Our two fourteen-year old cats are sisters from same litter. They have never been without one another, and their interaction with each other is fascinating. This past Friday night they worked together to get a chicken breast off the kitchen counter. And the dog noticed before we did and gobbled it up. We must remember that cats have a different way of showing love than dogs, which is a reminder that love comes in many forms. It is not uniform, and this is true of all of creation. As I said earlier, each creature has its own unique glow and glory.

Now, science is beginning to confirm the intuitions of mystics throughout the ages, including Francis, that we share kinship with animals. Consider the insights from the

fascinating book “When Elephants Weep,” which explores the emotional lives of animals. Author Jeffrey Masson writes about animal relationships that surely transcend mere survival and can even be called love. Masson writes, “Lionesses baby-sit for one another just as house cats sometimes do. And, elephants appear to make allowances for other members of their herd. One African herd always traveled slowly because one of its members had never fully recovered from a broken leg suffered as a calf. And, a park warden reported coming across a herd with a female carrying a small calf several days dead, which she placed on the ground whenever she ate or drank. She traveled very slowly and the rest of the elephants waited for her. There appears to be so little survival value in the behavior of this herd, that perhaps one has to believe that they behaved this way just because they loved their grieving friend who loved her dead baby. These elephants wanted to support her and love her.”

Recent questions in ecology and theology have focused on animal life. Do animals have souls? Do animals go to heaven? Without becoming entangled in theological discourse, I want to say quite clearly that Ben the dog is ensouled. His soul is a core constitutive beingness, a particularity of life that is completely unique, with his own personality and mannerisms. To use the language of Franciscan philosopher Duns Scotus, Ben reveals his own “thisness.” Scotus placed a great emphasis on the inherent dignity of each and every thing that exists. Each living being gives glory to God by its unique, core being. Soul is simply the mirror of creaturely relatedness that reflects the vitality of divine Love.

Thus, I do not have to wonder whether or not Ben has a soul. I know it implicitly by the way he listens to me talking, the way he sits at my feet under the desk in my office waiting for me to finish writing or talking so he can then interact with me again and play. I know that he is ensouled simply because of the way he looks at me—eye to eye—in the early morning, at the start of a new day. Soul existence is expressed in Ben’s language of love.

Love makes us something. Every creature is born out of the love of God, sustained in love, and transformed in love. Every sparrow that falls to the ground is known and loved by God. God is in the interweaving flow of love between all creatures. When we see and embrace this cosmic communion of love we are putting on the mind of Christ. And, what could be better than that.

And once again today, I end with a poem. This one is by Galway Kinnell, and it is appropriately called “Saint Francis and the Sow.”

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don’t flower,

for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on the brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of the earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing
beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.