



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

October 5, 2025; Pet Sunday (St Francis Day)

My mother loved animals. She loved animals so much that in addition to five kids, our small house was the home to ducks, chickens, rabbits, turtles, tadpoles, mice, goldfish (which never seemed to survive), and lots of cats and kittens. Dogs not so much. When my siblings and I were little we had a dog and my grandfather and next-door neighbor had dogs, but – perhaps because being terrorized by five out of control kids – none of them were all that friendly to us. As a result, I was a little nervous when my own kids were little and we got a dog. I remember the day we picked a puppy, how the car was filled with this dog smell, and how for the first few days she struggled to get to sleep. We called her Sasha. We had gotten Sasha for the kids but guess who fed her, walked her, and spent the most time with her... and guess who fell in love? Sasha and I did everything together. We climbed mountains, explored forests, swam in rivers, jumped in the ocean and played in the snow. She was the first to hear my sermons and prayers. She was always excited to see me and always ready to do one more thing. She taught me about parenting, about loyalty, and about love. It might sound strange but I cried more when she died than when my mom died. When my mom died, I went silent. When my dog died, I sobbed. Jane Goodall once said, “You cannot share your life with a dog and not know perfectly well that animals have personalities, minds and feelings.” I completely agree.

Today is the blessing of the animals. While we bless them, this service is really about how the animals have blessed us. I know I said this before, but imagine for a moment what our relationships would be like if we greeted our spouses or kids or friends the way our pets greet us – always excited to see them, running to the door, wagging our tails. Imagine how much better those relationships would be if we encouraged those around us the way we encouraged our pets – saying “Good job!” and giving them a treat every time they did something right. Imagine what would happen if we gave our spouses the same enthusiastic and unconditional love and ultimate trust that our pets give us. Imagine if God did that for us, if God did that for you. Actually you don’t have to imagine that because God already does.

Today we are using the readings for St. Francis Day. St. Francis' main theme was not animals or creation. His goal was to imitate Jesus and his main way to do that was to embrace what he called “lady poverty,” becoming poor because Jesus was poor. The son of a prosperous merchant in Assisi, Francis lived a lavish lifestyle. One day, after hearing the story of the Rich Young Man who came to Jesus and passages such as the story of the Rich Man and his storehouses from this morning’s gospel, he decided to give that all up.

Though that was not a popular decision with his parents, St. Francis' decision helped him let go of distractions and find beauty in nature, in the community of people that he gathered around him, and with God instead. Grounded in prayer and surrounded by the wonders of the creative world, he found both the peace that passes understanding and the reality of love. By imitating Jesus, he became like Jesus and was able to share Jesus with others.

What would it be like to love unconditionally and enthusiastically, without letting emotions or history or baggage get in the way? What would it be like if we could let go of the distractions in our lives, imitate Jesus and become like Jesus and be Jesus for the people (and animals) in our lives?

To quote Jane Goodall again, "Somehow we must keep hope alive – a hope that we can find a way to educate all, alleviate poverty, assuage anger, and live in harmony with the environment, with animals and with each other." Perhaps it's not by accident that dog spelled backward is God. Maybe on this day we bless our pets, our pets will bless us and show us what Jane Goodall, St. Francis, and Jesus were talking about.