

“All creatures great and small ”

- This is my 13th Blessing of the Animals as a parish priest
 - Back in 2009, I was a deacon serving in the church, and I was ordained a priest on September 29
 - The feast of St. Michael and all angels
 - The very next Sunday was the blessing of the animals, so I have a fondness in my heart for this tradition
 - I will never forget celebrating the Eucharist for the very first time as a new priest with dogs barking their “amens”
 - I will also never forget thinking to myself, immediately after saying the prayer of blessing, or epiclesis, over the bread and wine...
 - “Well, I hope that worked!”
 - Over the years, I have blessed a lots of dogs and cats, a snake, cock roaches, cows and chickens, horses, ferrets, hamsters
 - And a load of stuffed critters
 - Celebrating St. Francis has always been a special day to me and in my ministry
 - I think it is because throughout my life pets have played a huge part
 - In fact, my dogs that have been major sources of comfort through the challenging parts of life
 - I remember as a teenager going through crazy teenager challenges, just hugging our little Daschund named Molly
 - And thinking how simple and wonderful her life seemed when compared to my teenage drama,
 - And how I thought switching places might be a fun idea.
 - Through Katy’s and my first dog named Beans, who I had to carry out of the Petco adoption because he was so scared
 - And then Rosie, and while she was furry and four legged, she was practically our first baby
 - And now Sally and Beretta, the “girlies” as Atticus calls them, whom we discussed not too long ago in a sermon

- These companions have been a part of shaping me into who I am, and I imagine you too can name the pets who have made a difference in your life
- The ones who you still miss, and that the grief is real even though they are pets and not human beings...
- Today I will invite to name those pets in our prayers of the people.
- So when I first learned about St. Francis, and learned of his special connection to animals
 - Learned about his “odd” habit of preaching to birds, I did not blink an eye
 - In fact, I have preached a few sermons to my dogs over the years, as they were unwilling congregants while I practiced
 - And no sermon for St. Francis is complete without the stories that turned a humble man into a legend and a saint
- First is the Wolf of Gubbio ¹
 - The story goes that a fierce wolf began attacking livestock in Gubbio while Francis was living there
 - It was not long before the wolf escalated the attack to the people in the town, and even dining on them exclusively
 - Weapons were rumored to be useless, and all who attempted to kill the wolf were killed
 - Francis was said to have made the sign of the cross as he left the town’s gates and headed towards the wolf’s lair
 - As he approached the wolf came running toward him, jaws open
 - But Francis once again made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to stop his attacks in the name of God
 - The wolf was said to walk docilely up to Francis and lay at his feet.
 - Rather than killing the wolf, Francis decided to make peace, and promised to feed the wolf every day so long as it did not attack and kill again
 - They even shook on the deal- paw in hand
 - And impressive deed, certainly, considering my dogs won’t even walk on a leash very well for me
- The second story that brings us here with our pets today is of Francis preaching to the birds ²

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolf_of_Gubbio

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_of_assisi

- Which as I have mentioned, is no surprise at all to preachers everywhere, because animals are very forgiving parishioners
- Sally was our dog during seminary, and I would preach to her every time I needed to write and practice a sermon
- As he and his companions were walking, Francis told his friends to wait while he goes and preaches to his sisters the birds
- The birds were intrigued by his voice and none of the flew away
- He concluded his sermon to them by saying,
 - Beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praise to God.”³
- It is often that statues of Francis have a bird in his hand or on his shoulder
- They were our brothers and sisters too, and he advocated serving them wherever they require it
- St. Francis’ love for God’s creation did not end with the animals
 - And what he was really remembered for was his love for people, especially the poor and sick
 - This is why I believe Pope Francis chose this as his namesake
 - He embraced the poorest of the poor- the sick, even the ones with sores on their bodies
 - Francis would help bath them, feed them, and even kiss them in their illness making sure they still were treated as people
 - He seemed to have no regard to getting sick himself
 - He embraced poverty and dedicated himself to serving those who needed it the most.
 - Francis let nothing stop him from serving God and God’s children
- What I think St. Francis knew on a deep level sometimes takes us some time to learn
 - It is our deep and abiding connection to the rest of creation
 - [Bp Paula- “creation care”]
 - We as humans so often see the world as ours to use, consume, and see ourselves as separate from it
 - How much of a fiction that is, especially now as we have begun to see the effects of climate change throughout the world
 - Drought, powerful storms, melting ice caps
 - Species going extinct

³ <http://angels.about.com/od/MiraclesReligiousTexts/p/Francis-Of-Assisi-Miracle-Man-And-Patron-Saint-Of-Animals.htm>

- As we experience the effects of war in Ukraine on the world's food supply
- We can collectively act as though we are not at all connected and dependent upon the rest of creation
- But that is a thinly veiled falsehood, isn't it?
- And so easily then we can even begin to see other people as commodities to use, means to ends
- But in God's eyes, and what is exhibited through the life of St. Francis, is that we are all so deeply connected
- I even believe that God has redemptive plans for all of creation, not just human beings and our individual souls
- I am convinced of this: heaven is not just for people! Think about it...
- In Revelations chapter 21, the author whom we believe to be John, writes:
 - "Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," (Rev 21:1)
 - He is quoting Isaiah chapter 65, and God through the prophet goes on to describe the new heaven and earth God is working to bring about
 - It is the end goal, God's dream, for us and creation
 - It speaks of peace, long life, of having our needs met with houses and vineyards, and the absence of violence and theft
 - And it says the wolf and the lamb shall feed together.
 - The lion and the ox eat straw side by side
 - And if there are those animals in God's new heaven and new earth, then by God there are dogs and cats too
 - Dog is just God spelled backwards!
 - What would heaven be for dog people like me without those beloved pets?
 - There are dogs in heaven! You'll never convince me otherwise!
- Today we honor the saint to knew instinctively that God's love was woven deeply into the very fabric of the whole universe
 - And we bless these pets because they have blessed us.
 - Because they are able to sneak into our hearts and bring us happiness and comfort
 - And remind us of our interconnectedness to all creation
 - Today we just say out loud the lessons they have taught us about love, patience, companionship and resilience
 - May God continue to use our pets, and indeed the whole of nature, to teach us about God's love for us.

Amen.