

THE  
EIGHTEENTH  
SUNDAY  
AFTER  
PENTECOST

The Rev.  
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*Blessing the Animals*

While it is often forgotten or ignored, animals have a special place in the Biblical account of God's creative activity, and are included in God's hope for future of peace and harmony: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

Although some influential thinkers like Thomas Aquinas have disparaged animals as lacking rationality and immortal souls, others such as Methodist founder John Wesley have insisted that animals will attain heaven. He maintained that in what he called the "general deliverance" from the world's pervasive wrongs and cruelties, animals would be given "vigor, strength and swiftness...to a far higher degree than they ever enjoyed.

And of course we have Francis, whose life gives us cause for our celebration today. Francis called animals "brothers" and "sisters" and even preached to them! And Albert Schweitzer said that "to the truly ethical man, all life is sacred, including life regarded by some as "less than ours."<sup>1</sup>

While "Blessing of the Animal" services which we celebrate today are very high on the "cuteness factor" occasions like today hold a far more meaningful call to move beyond ourselves and into God's hope for the beauty and purpose of the natural world.<sup>2</sup> In the book of Genesis we see that with delight, God proclaims the goodness of creation. Genesis also tells us that we are created in the image of God. This image of God was meant to be mirrored in the responsibility we were given over the created order in order to tend and secure its wellbeing.

We have been given "dominion" over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth in the *same way* that God has dominion over humankind.

What we have long forgotten to mirror is that God's practice of dominion is characterized by mercy, gentleness, compassion, and caretaking. We are meant to care for creation the way that God cares for us. Just as God desires our wholeness and joy we were meant to offer the land and the creatures of the land, the sea, and the air this same chance to flourish and be nurtured by a loving hand.

God's gift of dominion was never meant to give the human creature license to treat the earth, air, land and it's creatures as its own personal piggy bank to plunder, squander, and destroy. We were created in the image of God to value and love the created order as God so deeply values and loves us.

Joan Chittister reminds us that the Creed also gives a testimony to creation that we, the human creature, has far too long ignored. "God, the Creed insists, created the earth. The earth and its creatures, like us in other words, breathes the breath of God." She asks "what is it that has been created by God that does not reflect the presence of God? What is it created by God that can so cavalierly be destroyed or abused without remorse, without awareness of the divine life within it?"<sup>3</sup>

God created a world of such diversity and beauty that is cause for awe. The created order witnesses to God's glory, majesty, power, and goodness. "Human life stands as part of the creation, dependent upon the created order whose purpose is beyond understanding."<sup>4</sup>

Animals and the natural world in which they live provide the very conditions that make human life possible; we are dependent on all of creation for our very well being. But, we should never misunderstand that the earth, the animals and everything else that is in it was created solely for the sake of humanity.

Too often we act as if humans are the center of the world and as if all of creation were simply for our enjoyment and satisfaction. Creation has its own beauty and goodness that demands recognition and has a means and an end that extends far beyond our use of it and its resources.<sup>5</sup>

As Christians, our behavior toward animals and the natural world asks us to examine deeply moral questions that will challenge us to think about many things. Things like animals tortured to advance science, land stripped and habitats destroyed for the profit of a few, waters redirected, polluted, and poisoned, the list goes on and on.

<sup>1</sup> George W. Cornell, AP Writer

<sup>2</sup> David J Schlafer and Timothy F. Sedgwick, *Preaching What We Practice: Proclamation and Moral Discernment*, Morehouse Publishing, 2007, page 60.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief*, Liguori/Triumph 2009, Missouri, page 57.

<sup>4</sup> Schlafer/Sedgwick.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

So while a service dedicated to the blessing of the animals may in fact seem frivolous to some, the deeper truth is that blessing animals is a reminder that God is bigger than our own hearts, and that God's purposes take in all creatures.

We bless them today to recognize their importance in the great scheme of God's created order in more ways than we can measure—that they are created and important to God in their own right. Blessing animals is a sign of humility and respect on our part and an admission that humans are not the center of everything.

Moreover, the animals that we bless today are our companions. They are part of our lives, they share our homes, and the more science and study advances we learn that some may even share our joys and sorrows.<sup>6</sup>

Because they are our companions, our friends, we are reminded that friends are not there to be used or easily forgotten or discarded when they grow old or somehow inconvenient.

The companionship of animals is yet another of God's gracious gifts and a sign of God's care for us. Most of us gathered here today do not depend on our livelihoods from animals, but there are many in God's world that do. So even beyond the companionship which we share with our beloved creatures we also give thanks for the many ways that animals both give and sustain life for many. Today we bless the animals, but we must never forget the multitude of ways that animals bless us even more. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. David Bartlett