

# Saint Stephen's

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty  
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 6, 2024

## The Blessing of Animals

*Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16*



*Saint François et Sainte Claire (Atelier-Saint-André)*

[Genesis 2:18-24] The Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

The foundation of all of Jesus' teachings is love – love of God, love of neighbor, love of self. In the Genesis story of creation we heard today, the first man knows the fulfillment of relationship with the first woman – together, they are more than they are separately. Their bond is holy.

In the gospel today, Jesus contrasts this ethic of committed, devoted, mutual relationship to the marriage practices of his time, where a man could divorce his wife without her consent, pushing her outside the family community and making her physically, economically, and socially vulnerable.

Jesus calls this 1<sup>st</sup> century inequity “hardhearted,” but his words should not be heard as condemnation of people today who determine with humility, respect and careful thought that a marriage must end for the well-being of those in it. I'm not going to go deeper into this now, but if this gospel worries you, please let's talk further.

Today, we celebrate the feasts of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi,

twelfth century mystics who inspired each other and founded religious communities based on prayer, living the gospel, and serving the poor. They are also known for their friendship with animals, which is itself a holy relationship.

As we heard in the Genesis reading today, the first creatures that God makes to relieve human loneliness include every animal of the field and every bird of the air. So, it has always been that we develop special relationships with animals, ones that teach us to love and to serve all of creation.

For my family, these dear relationships have been with four black labradors. I am remembering a day five years ago when our third dog McKinley was nearing the end of her life, although we didn't know it then.

It was the first week of October and my husband Will was eager to get out for one more solo backpacking trip before winter weather set in. It was just for one overnight, but he hoped to go some distance, so he watched the weather forecast all

week and packed and repacked as the probability of rain changed. He also deliberated over whether Kinley should go with him.

It really made the most sense for her to stay at home. Will could go faster without her, because Kinley's arthritis sometimes slowed her down. And he could pack lighter without her food and rain jacket, and sleep easier without her stinky farts filling the tent.

But we both knew what would happen – of course Kinley would go. Even with Will's gear going in and out of his pack, Kinley's sleeping vest never left it.

“She needs to go,” Will said on Friday night as she closely watched him packing her dog food and arthritis medicine. “She misses the trail,” he said. Which also means, “I need her to go. The mountains are more beautiful when she is with me.”

That is the mystery of love between us and these animals who share our lives. And it is at the heart of why we remember the feast of St. Francis

today in a service of thanksgiving and blessing.

We give thanks for the miracle of creation, for the sun and moon, sea and land, all the richness and beauty of creation that nourish our lives and fill us with wonder. We give thanks for God's creatures, great and small, both cute and cuddly, and those that are creepy, with lots of legs and exoskeletons.

We give thanks for our own lives, how we are knit together and find meaning in our relationships -- with other humans, for sure, but also with creatures past and present.

Some of us may have learned to love in the first place through the love of our animal companions, as children or even into adulthood. They do not hide their need for us and their desire to be with us. They attend us carefully and come close when we are sad or in any kind of distress.

They love us unconditionally and, in that way, they teach us to love; when we see ourselves through their eyes, they help us believe what they see,

that we are worthy of love, that we *are* love.<sup>i</sup>

They are agents of divine love, I think. One of the clever ways God coaxes us into opening our hearts and risking vulnerability out of desire for connection and community. One of the many ways we are blessed.

And so, marveling in all the ways we are blessed by creation and God's creatures, we ask God's blessing on our animal companions in turn, for so many reasons. They are, like us, made by our creator in love.

Their perfect ease in being themselves inspires us to live into

our own unique, God-given self. The way they inhabit their bodies, robust or frail, and the way they attend to them with patience, reminds us that we are animals, too, and that our bodies are worthy of care.

And their simple and wild pleasure in everyday life not only makes us happy but brings us back to the knowledge of why we are created: to recognize, trust, and join with the holy at work in every moment, and unceasingly, to give thanks, to rejoice, and to love.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Maria Popova, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/11/12/mary-oliver-dog-songs/>