

All creatures, great and small

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Saint Francis Day, October 4, 2015.

So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal...

Genesis 2:19

Today is the Feast of Saint Francis and with all the interest in the recent visit of Pope Francis who expresses concern for the care of the environment, it is appropriate that we celebrate this day with the blessing of animals as part of all God's creation. The scriptures tell us that God created us a little lower than the angels with the intent that we have companions rather than be alone. (Hebrews 2:9) There are all kinds of relationships into which we are formed from traditional and non-traditional marriage and family to the companionship of a variety of domestic animals. In medieval times religious communities were formed that included the Franciscans founded by Saint Francis of Assisi whom we honor today.

Francis was born into the family of a wealthy merchant in Assisi in Umbria in the year 1181. The young Francis was high-spirited and drawn to the age of chivalry, reveling in being a proverbial knight in shining armor. When he came across another knight who was shabbily dressed, Francis was so moved with compassion that he gave him his own knight's clothing and armor. This experience cut short his dreams of glory when he realized that his ambitions were shallow and superficial and began to seek a simpler way of life. He spent hours wandering the countryside alone in search of a life that had more substance and less style. He was no longer interested in the trivial and transitory values by which he had been living. When he encountered a leper whose sores filled him with horror and disgust, he overcame his revulsion and embraced him and gave him all the money he had. This was a transforming moment in Francis' life as he began to visit hospitals and leper colonies and joined a group of beggars to experience the life of poverty and humility. He realized that the less he had, the happier he became.

On his return home, Francis entered a church and was transfixed by the image of Christ on the cross. It is there that he responded to an inner call to do something about the repairs on the church. He took some of his father's fine cloths and sold them and used the money to restore the church. When his father discovered what his son had done he was furious and demanded that he either return home and pay back what he sold or renounce his inheritance. Francis not only gave back the money and gave him the clothes he had on, he renounced his inheritance and broke off all relations with his family. Seeing him in rags, someone gave him an old gardener's tunic to wear that became a sign of his desire to live a life of simplicity and poverty. Francis continued to wander around the countryside and eventually returned to Assisi to join the stonemasons in restoring the deteriorating church. He asked others to join him in forming a community to live a life of poverty and purity of spirit, living in huts of wood and clay while engaging in manual labor and dedicating themselves to serving the poor.

Living without material things gave Francis a greater love of nature and a new appreciation of the sun and the moon as well as the air, water, fire, flowers, birds and animal life. With the help of a young woman named Clare, Francis helped to form a similar community for women known as the Poor Clares. He continued to roam the countryside, bringing people to a greater awareness of the value of living a life of self-denial. Few of us would subject ourselves to such a rigorously ascetic life, yet there is something in all of us that yearns to live more simply. We yearn to be closer to God and nature.

On this feast of Saint Francis we honor the companionship of animals and our kinship with all of God's creatures. They have a remarkable capacity for sensing how we are feeling and provide comfort in times of stress. Pets have an intergenerational appeal as companions to people of all ages. As a child I had a dog from the time I was in sixth grade until after I became a priest. She would bid us farewell in the morning when we left for school and was there to welcome us when we returned home. When she reached the end of her long life it seemed that a part of my childhood went with her.

Dogs love us even when we are at our most unlovable and we marvel at the challenge to be as wonderful as they think we are. Dogs are devoted in their loyalty and provide companionship wherever we go and want to please us. Any of you who have cats know that they have a mind of their own and may or may not respond to the food provided for them.

Because animals suffer all the same illnesses as we have increases our affinity for them. They teach us about unconditional love and bring out our nurturing instincts. They are part of our closest relationships and are a comfort to us as we move through each stage in life. The companionship of animal friends reminds us of our kinship with all creation and of our interdependence with each other as companions along the way.