

Blessing All Our Neighbors **by the Rev. Dr. Paul S. Nancarrow**

Yesterday, October 4, was the feast day of St Francis of Assisi. Today we honor that feast day with our service of the Blessing of the Animals, held in the churchyard at 10am. For a long time, Francis has been kind of the unofficial patron saint of animal lovers—statues of Francis often depict him as holding birds, or with small animals gathered around his feet. More recently, Francis has come to be seen as the unofficial patron saint of the ecological movement, the “green” dimension of our faith, the effort to bring together environmental ethics and Christian concern. All of those aspects of Francis’ witness and ministry are bound up in our custom of remembering Francis by blessing the animals.

Because when we bless the animals after the example of Francis, we are doing a very particular thing. For Francis, blessing the animals wasn’t just about having nice feelings for cute critters. For Francis, blessing was about creating a genuine godly relationship with the animals.

There is a story about Francis that one time he preached a sermon to the birds. He was walking along the road, on his way to preach somewhere, and he passed a stand of trees. The trees were full of singing birds, and Francis was so moved by the beauty of their song, that he wanted to explain to them what their singing meant. So he left the road and stood before the trees and he said “Sister Birds, God has given you beautiful voices, and God has given you beautiful plumage, and God gives you trees to build your nests in, and God gives you berries and fruits and worms for your food, and God gives you air to fly through, and God loves you all very much. And it is because God loves you,” Francis said, “that you give back your song to God.” Their song was saying “Thank you” to God, Francis told them, and they said “Thank you” to God so beautifully that human beings could learn a lot from them about how to say “Thank you” to God, too. And, the story goes, when Francis finished his sermon and went on his way down the road, the birds followed him, and the birds flew around him, and some of the birds even came and perched on his shoulders and his arms as he walked—which is why statues of Francis often show him with birds. The birds were so moved by Francis’ preaching, just as Francis had been moved by the birds’ singing, that they came together in this marvelous sharing of thanks and praise to God. For Francis, blessing the birds was all about building up with them a faithful and godly relationship.

There is another story about how Francis created a faithful relationship with a fierce wolf outside the town of Gubbio. The story goes that the wolf was vicious and ravenous, and the wolf often killed the villagers’ sheep, and the wolf even killed some of the villagers, because his appetite was so fearsome. The villagers wanted to hunt down and exterminate the wolf, but Francis begged permission to go out into the forest and talk to the wolf first. So Francis went out, and the wolf smelled him coming, and the wolf started to run at him with his fangs bared—and Francis blessed the wolf with the sign of the cross, and the wolf stopped short in his tracks. And Francis said “Brother Wolf, why are you killing the villagers’ sheep all the time?” And Francis communicated with the wolf by talking, and the wolf communicated with Francis by wagging his tail and twitching his ears and moving his head—and together Francis and the wolf came to an understanding. So Francis brought the wolf into town, and the villagers were terrified—until Francis helped the villagers and the wolf come to an understanding. Their understanding was that the villagers promised to feed the wolf every day, and the wolf promised not to hunt any of their sheep or any of their children or any of them, and he promised to keep other dangerous animals away. And every day, for the rest of the wolf’s life, one of the villagers would put out food for it, and the wolf never killed another living thing in all of the forest. For Francis, blessing that wolf was all about building up a faithful and godly relationship.

And I think that’s the part of Franciscan-style blessing of the animals that matters most to us. We may not ever preach to birds or make nice with wolves. But we are called to build up right relationships, faithful and godly relationships, with our neighbors—and I believe that means *all* our neighbors: our human neighbors, and our animal neighbors, and our plant neighbors; our neighbors in the city and our neighbors on the farm and our neighbors in the forest and our neighbors in the mountains. We carry on the godly work of Francis, we bless the way Francis blessed, when we work to build up right relationships with all our non-human, as well as human, neighbors.

And of course our most immediate non-human neighbors are our pets, our companion animals, the very animals many of us brought to the Blessing service today. When we pray God’s blessing on these animal companions, we are

also promising to do our best to build up faithful, godly, loving relationships with them, to take care of them for their genuine well-being. And that's where blessing and animal welfare come together: blessing the animals means not neglecting them, not mistreating them, not letting them run loose when they might get into danger or harm other people's animals, not letting them have litters of puppies or kittens that are unwanted and might end up being abandoned or killed. Blessing the animals means helping to create the kind of community where animals are cared for—not just our own pets, but all the animals in the neighborhood—the kind of work being done by the SPCA and the Mosby Foundation and Cat's Cradle, organizations that spoke to our adult Sunday School last week, and that have provided information in a brochure handed out to everyone here today. I invite you to look over that brochure and consider what you might be able to do to help. Blessing the animals means taking on our own commitment to join in that kind of work, so that we can be more like Francis' village of Gubbio, where all the human and non-human neighbors looked out for each other's well-being and took care of each other's needs.

And when we start doing that, when we start really looking out for the well-being of our non-human neighbors, we begin to see that the network of godly relationships talked about by saints like Francis extends wider and wider, taking in more and more of our fellow creatures in God's creation. It's not just about our pets, it's about our farm animals; and it's not just about our domesticated animals, it's about the wild animals around us; and it's not just about the wild animals in our bioregion, it's about animals all over the world, in every nook and niche in our ecosystem. And it's not just about the animals: it's about the plants and the soil and the fungi and the bacteria and the water and the air, and the cycles of day and night, and the turning of the seasons, and the movements of the sun and moon and stars, and the whole incredibly complex and intricate and robust interweaving of relationships through which God creates Life on this Earth. Francis recognized that when he spoke not only about "Sister Bird" and "Brother Wolf," but also about "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon"—Francis understood that all of us, from the smallest to the greatest, are related to each other in the household of God's creatures.

Our Psalm this morning speaks that same truth, when it proclaims that the same law of God that drives the sun and the sky dwells also in the human heart. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork," the psalm says; but also "The law of the LORD is perfect and revives the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent." The commandment, the wisdom, that God gives to us to guide our lives is woven into the wisdom by which God orders the entire cosmos—and that means we human beings are woven deeply into the fabric of God's whole Creation.

And being woven by God into Creation, we human beings—especially we *Christian* human beings—have a special vocation, a special calling, within Creation. We can be the ones who recognize God's presence in all things. We can be the ones who know right relationships of mutual well-being in Christ, and who therefore in the Name of Christ go out to share those right relationships of mutual well-being with all the creatures we can reach. That's why Christians care about animal welfare. That's why Christians care about environmental ethics. That's why Christians care about sustainable farming. That's why Christians care about global warming and climate change. That's why Christians care about eco-justice. That's why Christians care about learning the most we can from the best that science has to teach us. Because we are called by Christ, as Francis was called by Christ, called to be instruments of Christ's peace, called to create faithful and godly relationships with all our neighbors in our widest neighborhood.

That is what we celebrate today. That's what we celebrate when we bless the animals. That's what we celebrate in the psalm, and in the Gospel call to give to God the produce of our work in God's vineyard. That's what we celebrate when we share the communion with all Creation that is given to us in Christ. That's what we celebrate when we go forth to love all our neighbors—*all* of them—as we love ourselves. And for that celebration, for that calling in Creation, let us give to God our thanks and our praise. Amen.