

“God and the Animals”

Some time ago I came across this:

“If you can:

Start the day without caffeine,
Get going without pep pills,
Resist complaining and boring others with your troubles,
Eat the same food everyday and be grateful for it,
Understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time,
Overlook it when something goes wrong through no fault of your own
and those you love take it out on you,
Take criticism and blame without resentment,
Ignore a friend’s limited education and never correct him,
Resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend,
Face the world without lies and conceit,
Conquer tension without medical help,
Relax without liquor,
Sleep without the aid of drugs,
Honestly say that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed,
color, gender, religion or politics,

Then, my friend, you are almost as good as your dog.”

Next Sunday afternoon we are going to have a blessing of the animals service. This will be held in conjunction with the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, which is on October 4th. St. Francis lived in the medieval period (around 1200 AD). He left a life of wealth and privilege to embrace a simple lifestyle and poverty, devoted to caring for the poor and needy. But he was also ahead of his time in that he had a profound respect for all creation, and the place of *animals* in the purpose of God. It is a custom of some churches to hold a service to bless the animals in honor of St. Francis.

When I mention the we are going to have a “Blessing of the Animals” service, some of you may snicker and be amused: “Why in the world would we do that?” Some may even be a bit annoyed that we would put so much emphasis on pets. A terse response might be: “There is so much human need in the world, we should be caring for *people*, not poodles and parakeets!” Well, certainly, caring for *people* is primary in the Christian faith – but this does not mean that animals are not important to God!

In recent years I have been rethinking the place of animals in the plan and purpose of God! ***First let me say, for many people, animals are an important part of our life.*** (Now if you are not an animal lover or pet lover, this sermon may not hit home to you. That’s OK). I have fond memories of pets I had growing up: rabbits, ducks, chicks, parakeets, fish, chameleons, little turtles. I remember as a boy going to Woolworths in Lancaster, and buying color-dyed baby chicks at Easter. Growing up, I wanted a dog, but my mom would not allow it. One day, my dad, sister and I were walking by a pet store and saw a puppy in the window. We went in and bought it and brought it home. Well,

Mom was not happy! She gave my dad an ultimatum: Either that dog goes or I go. Guess which my dad chose! So the dog went back to the pet store. It was only when I was in college that mom broke down and let a dog into our household.

For *children*, pets can teach respect for life, and the responsibility of caring for an animal (although I remember our daughter promising to feed and take care of a dog, and a rabbit, if we only got her one. And who wound up doing it? Nancy and me)!

For people living alone, a pet can be a companion. *For those in nursing homes*, a dog or cat can be therapeutic. Sometimes visitors will bring a dog or cat with them when they visit a nursing care facility. Some nursing care facilities have a dog or cat who stays in the home. Several nursing homes I've visited have a large bird cage or a fish tank.

We can attach all sorts of *emotional content* to our pets. Dr. Gerald Weeks, one of my instructors when I was being trained as a marriage and family therapist, commented that he is counseling more people who have emotional issues around pets. The first Christmas we were married I surprised Nancy with the gift of a dachshund puppy. That still carries a special meaning for me.

There can be a special bond between humans and animals. The Old Testament reading today is from 2 Samuel, chapter 12. King David sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba, and the prophet Nathan is sent by God to rebuke him. The prophet does so by telling a story about a rich man with many flocks and herds, who seizes one little lamb owned by a poor family, and has that lamb killed to serve as a meal for a guest. This lamb held a special place in the family's heart: "The poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. *It was like a daughter to him*" (2 Samuel 12:3).

The bond between our pets and us can be so strong that they can be just as dear as a family member. Some of you know that, if you've ever lost a beloved pet. My dad was a small guy, but tough. The only time I can remember him crying was when our dachshund's back legs became paralyzed, and dad made a little cart for her to walk. But we soon had her put down. Dad admitted riding to work with tears coming down his cheeks. I've cried when we've had to have our dogs put to sleep.

A veterinarian tells of hailing a taxicab outside O'Hare Airport in Chicago. He notes that the cab driver was a man with a three-day old beard, an old baseball cap and arms the size of tree trunks. As the cab driver threw the man's bags into the trunk, he saw the doctor's luggage tags. "What kind of doctor are you?" he asked. The vet continues the story, when I said, "Veterinarian", the cabbie's grizzled face broke into a smile. He slammed the doors of the cab, put the car into gear and immediately started talking: "My wife claims I love my toy poodle Missy more than I love her. Just once, she wants me to be as excited to see her as I am Missy. But Doc, it ain't gonna happen. Ya see, when I

get home from a long day in the cab, dead tired, I open the door and there are the two of them looking at me, Ma and Missy. Ma has a scowl on her face and is ready to tear into me. Missy, on the other hand, is shaking all over, she's that happy – her face is grinning so wide, she could eat a banana sideways. Now who do you think I'm going to run to?"

There's a friendship bond with animals and humans, but there can also be a connection that is mysterious and hard to explain. I once watched a TV program that highlighted a study that was done in Britain. It showed dogs who would come to the front door of their house as the owner arrives. So they did an experiment that showed a dog owner getting up from a getting up from park bench to return home. This was displayed on half of the TV screen. The other half showed what the dog was doing at that exact same time. This man's dog started arousing, then going to the door and waiting at the exact same time his owner was getting up from the park bench!

My dad had a special love for animals. He was always a hit with our dogs. We had a Miniature Schnauzer named "Happy". The night my dad died in the Lebanon VA hospital, he died just before I arrived with my mother and sister. When I called home to tell Nancy that dad had passed away, she told me that a little while before my call, Happy all of a sudden let out with a loud shriek. She asked me what time dad died. When I told her, she said that was the exact same time our dog had mysteriously howled.

What does the Bible say about animals? The answer is: Plenty! ***They are a part of God's good creation.*** Check out what the Bible says in Genesis 1:24-25. "And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good." The animals belong to God! Psalm 50:10-11 says, "For every animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine."

God cares for the animals. I find it interesting that during the time of Noah and the great flood, God only saved 8 human beings, but many more animals! After the flood, the Bible says God made a covenant with people *and the animals*, not to destroy the world again with a flood. "Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, *and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you*, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Genesis 9:8-11). The rainbow, then, is to be a sign of this covenant God establishes both with humans *and the animals*.

In the Book of Jonah, the prophet Jonah is reluctant to go to Nineveh to preach repentance because he wants God to destroy the city. God argues with Jonah: "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred

and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, *and also many animals?*” (Jonah 4:11). Jesus used God’s concern even for the sparrow to reassure His followers of God’s care of them: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God” (Luke 12:6).

The Bible also says that we are to care for the animals. There are Old Testament laws that command the humane treatment of animals. For instance in Deuteronomy 22:4 it says, “You shall not see your neighbor’s donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up.” Proverbs 12:10 says, “A righteous man cares for the needs of his animals.”

However, after saying all of this, I want to be careful to avoid gushy sentimentality when we’re thinking of animals and their place. The Hebrews slaughtered bulls and calves and sheep and doves for their religious sacrifices. They ate animals (although some types of meat was forbidden by the Old Testament laws). In Genesis 9 God says to Noah and his sons that God has given them the animals of the earth for food. Jesus ate fish and lamb (and probably other meats). Note here, it’s ok to be a vegetarian if you want, but there’s no basis in the Bible for not eating meat!

Sometimes we may wonder or ask: Do animals go to heaven? In one of the congregations I served as pastor there was a teenaged girl who loved animals. One of her pets died, and she told her mom to ask me whether or not animals go to heaven. Well, to be honest, I sort of blew it off and said that there’s no evidence in the Bible that animals go to heaven. I heard afterwards that the young girl was upset with my answer. But you know, the last few years I’ve reconsidered this question and changed my thinking.

As far as I can tell, Scripture doesn’t clearly say whether our pets will be in heaven with us. The Bible doesn’t say that animals do go to heaven, nor does it say animals will not be part of the afterlife. I suppose if you are *not* an animal lover, you *hope* there won’t be animals in heaven! You may be thinking, “I don’t want dog hair or cat litter boxes spoiling my stay in eternity!” But others, like this young girl I mentioned, would love to have a beloved pet in heaven with us! Frankly, I’d rather have our dog Sadie with us in heaven than a lot of people I know! Ken Davis is a Christian comedian who has a daily radio spot called “Lighten Up”. One day he joked about a lady who told him her cat would be in heaven because it watches religious programs on TV. He laughed, “Well, I don’t know.....”. I once read a newspaper article where Billy Graham said he believes pets can go to heaven.

Perhaps it’s not stretching our imagination to say animals might play a part in God’s eternal purposes. The prophet paints a beautiful picture of the new age, a kingdom of peace, where Messiah rules: “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together; and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, the young child will

put its hand into the viper's nest" (Isaiah 11:6-8). Notice the inclusion of animals in this description of God's kingdom. The New Testament tells how *all of creation* (people, plants, and animals) are waiting for God's final redemption: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subject to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now (Romans 8:19-22).

So, we're going to have a service for the blessing of animals. If you're not a pet lover, that's OK. But don't knock it. Because animals are an important part of God's creation. In that service we can thank God for them, and allow the church to recognize that these animals critters are very important to some of us.

A church that I once served held a Blessing of the Animals event. I had not done it while I was at that church. I was at a different place then in my thinking, and I didn't value it as much as I do today. I heard through the grapevine that because that church had a blessing of the animals serve one of the couples in the church - a husband and wife - were so angry and upset that they left the church! They thought it was nonsense to have such a thing. How sad, to have such a negative, narrow spirit.

Our United Methodist Book of Worship contains a ritual and liturgy for such a service. Next Sunday we will be using part of that ritual as we bless the animals. In the introduction to the service it says, "A Blessing of Animals...witnesses to God's and the Church's love, care and concern for creation. As we recognize our mutual interdependence with God's creatures, the Church's witness of stewardship of creation is strengthened."

There is a book called, "Dogspell: A Dogmatic Theology on the Abounding Love of God." It's written by Mary Ellen Ashcroft, a Christian, and a college professor. It's a whimsical, yet serious little book on theology. It compares the love of God to the love that a dog can have for its owner. One of her students in the college said to her: "If I thought God loved me as much as my dog it would change everything. I wouldn't be looking for love in all the wrong places."

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
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