

Blessing of the Animals

October 2, 2016

We celebrate the Blessing of the Animals today because it's the Sunday closest to the feast day of St. Francis Assisi, which is October 4th.

Almost 800 years ago, Francis introduced the idea that humans aren't the only one of God's blessed creatures. While people in the 13th century undoubtedly cared for their animals, those not raised for food were kept for utility: dogs for hunting and guarding, cats for controlling rodent problems in barns, birds of prey like falcons and hawks for hunting or sport. Horses for battle, hunting, plowing, transportation and, among the upper classes, for sport and leisure. Until relatively recently, according to accepted Christian teachings, animals didn't possess souls.

Early in his ministry, probably some time between 1210-15, Francis was questioning everything he had done up to this point in his life. He was filled with self-doubt about his calling, wondering whether he should have joined the family business and gotten married, as his wealthy and noble parents wanted him to do. The story goes that Francis took a walk outside the walls of Assisi one day, asking God if he was on the right path, as many of us do. While he was praying on his walk, Francis stopped to talk to the birds around him, telling them about God's glories and why both birds and humans should be grateful to their creator. This was the beginning of Francis's recognition of the holiness of all God's creatures, whom he called his brothers and sisters. Today St. Francis is recognized most for being the patron saint of animals.

Anyone who has loved an animal knows without doubt that he or she has a soul. All you have to do is look into a beloved animal's eyes to know they possess intelligence, emotion, understanding, and love. For me, it's their love that is the evidence of their soul. Whoever evokes love in us has to have a soul, because love is the highest expression of our spirit or soul; it's the highest expression — the only one — of God.

I love the story of how Francis became known as the patron saint of animals, because the self-doubt that started it all is a common to many even today. Francis was frustrated by the obstacles he met as he tried to live as God commanded him. He disappointed his parents — he was the eldest son of a wealthy merchant; he gave up a second career, the military, when God asked him, "Who would you rather serve, the servant or the Master?" His friends and peers shunned him because his actions confused them. His father imprisoned him and then disinherited him.

In the midst of these struggles Francis wondered if he was on the right path. Who wouldn't? Those are some big obstacles!

Yet instead of talking to his friends, a psychologist, his teachers... he went out for a walk and talked to God. How many of us do that, go right to the source and ask, "Am I where you want me to be? Is there a reason for this struggle? Am I on the right path?"

I work as a minister, a hypnotist and medium, and this a common question among my clients. We all have a yearning to know if we're living purposeful lives; some among us are afraid we're wasting time, not doing what we're meant to do. Many of my clients are distressed because they feel like they should be doing something meaningful, but they don't even know what it is. I advise them to do what Francis did — take it up with God. Ask God and listen for the answer. Then ask Him for the courage you need to change what isn't right.

But today as I think about Francis of Assisi, one of my favorite saints, I realize that there's another step to self-discovery, an action in addition to simply asking our Creator, Am I on the right path? And that's singing the praises of our God.

Francis in the midst of his self-doubt, stops to talk to the birds about the glory of God. Do you think the birds needed to hear this? Probably not... so I think the lesson for us is that Francis had to SAY it to someone. And who better to bare our hearts and souls to than an animal, who makes no judgement about us? When I talk to my dog Memphis, my cats Archie & Reggie, even the birds and snakes and deer I see on my walks in the woods, I get no argument. I'm not embarrassed because I don't have a scholarly take on God; I'm not shy about loving God aloud to an animal because the animal won't feel awkward, try to change my mind, or scoff at my beliefs.

Animals give us a safe place to talk to God, to praise God, to wonder aloud if we're living our best lives, on the right path. I'm convinced animals are not burdened by egos and so they easily recognize the divinity in each other and in us. When my animals see the good in me, the God in me, I more trustingly surrender. I more trustingly invite God into my life, to heal me, to guide me, to show me my path. I don't think I could do that so easily if I didn't have animals in my life.

We like to anthropomorphize our pets: he's sad because I have to leave for work, she's making me feel guilty because I won't share my dinner with her. My former neighbor was convinced her dachshund was spiteful because he kept peeing inside. She didn't house train him, but that didn't seem to factor into her conclusions. I'd watch her explain (in words) to her dog that he wasn't supposed to pee inside, so when the unhouse-trained dog inevitably DID pee inside, my neighbor's judgement was that her dog was spiting her. Because she told him not to. And he was doing it anyway.

We think of them as family, and because we belong to the human family it's not a big stretch to extend human personality characteristics to our animal companions. But I submit to you that

we're doing them a disservice when we anthropomorphize. Animals don't judge us. How could they? They're without ego, they're unselfconscious. They live in the present and don't worry about the future. They are able to be here, now, as Ram Dass encourages us. They are all those things the mystics advise us to be.

So, and maybe I'm shooting myself in the foot here, consider whether it's really necessary to see a psychic, or a minister, or a hypnotist if you wonder whether you're on the right path. Go take a walk and talk to the wildlife you encounter about the wonders of God in your life, however you experience it. Take a ride with your dog, or sit with your cat on your lap, and talk to that animal as if you, too, were unselfconscious.

You're not the first to wonder if you've found your calling or if you're on the right path. You won't be the last to wonder if you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. Let your beloved animal be your sounding board, as Francis did. Because our animals are just like God in their ability to accept, forgive, and bless us, even if we fail time and time again.

In the quiet acceptance from our animals, in the absence of the judgement, opinion or commentary as from a friend, I believe we can hear God's voice. If you call out into the void, "I'm lost! I'm stuck! I don't know why I'm here!" and you receive the gorgeous, blessed love in your dog's eyes or your cat's purr, or you witness the wildlife around you undisturbed by anxiety, you WILL hear what you need to hear. I promise.

And when you're done offering your confusion to the passionately receptive animal world, speak to them about your blessings, and praise the God who brought you to this point.

Francis said to the birds, "Clearly, our Creator loves you dearly, since he gives you gifts so abundantly. So please beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and always sing praise to God."

Couldn't we say the same to each other, now?

Amen.