

October 8, 2017
Psalm 19
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Creekside COB

“Blessing of the Animals”

Blessing of the Animals Good morning! This is the day that the Lord has made: I hope you are finding ways to rejoice and be glad in it. As some of you probably know, or may have guessed, Psalm 19 which Lois just read for us, is one of my favorites from the entire collection of psalms. I love the assertion that God’s creation is good and that God’s law is perfect: not only because I love these things, too, but because there’s an order implied here which gives me comfort and hope. This is God’s sacred world: God made it and declared it good. Despite humanities persistent efforts to dominate, pollute and destroy it, it is still God’s handiwork. God’s law is still God’s law; even when we ignore it or consciously act against it, God’s law is just and life-giving.

I don’t know about you, but it can be hard for me to plug into the daily news cycle -- or maybe to unplug from it. I got up Monday morning and heard 400 hundred people had been injured by bullets. Four hundred. How is that even possible? It’s easy to have my attention pulled from one crisis to the next crises, and feel like the world is a hostile and threatening place. Sometimes that anxiety can be so acute that I literally forget to give thanks for each day that I have been blessed with, and to be aware of the blessings which are part of every day. A text like Psalm 19, which is brimming with God’s goodness and a planned and ordered world can be an antidote to the poison of hatred and violence. We cannot deny the existence of hatred and violence: as incredible as it may seem, a lone gunman in Las Vegas actually killed 59 people and wounded nearly five hundred others. We can’t simply stick our heads in the sand and pretend that didn’t happen, or just hope it won’t ever happen again, but side by side with that narrative -- and the stories we have heard about natural disasters

-- are the stories of great and small acts of heroism and courage and selflessness: strangers pulling strangers to safety, thousands of people donating blood, people helping their neighbors, churches sending relief in the form of food, water, cleaning supplies, childcare, people to rebuild. These are part of the story too, even though they rarely make headlines.

So this morning I'd like to do something a little different: I'm going to do something my preaching professor told us to never, never do. Some of you know my homiletics professor -- please don't tell her about this sermon. I'm going to make your stories the center of the sermon today, and put a theological frame around that for us -- rather than the other way around. I have asked several of you to share photos and a few sentences of reflection: I could have asked many other people; please feel free to share your stories with others as you have the opportunity.

Let me give you a little context: most of you have heard of Francis of Assisi. He was a man born to a wealthy Italian family in the 12th century. His birth name was Giovanni di Pietro di Bernadone, but he was known as Francesco. His is a riches to rags story: he was born into privilege, but came to embrace poverty and simplicity. He founded the Franciscan order of the Catholic Church. He was canonized as St. Francis, and became known as the patron saint of the natural world and of animals. There's a little image of Francis on your bulletin: if you have or have seen a garden statue of a guy in a robe, it is probably St. Francis with a bird on his shoulder and woodland creatures at his feet. He wrote a famous prayer in praise of Brother Sun and Sister Moon. Hymn 48 in the Blue hymnal "All Creatures of our God and King," is an adaptation of that text.

The feast day of St. Francis is October 4, and in some Catholic parishes there is a service called The Blessing of the Animals on or around that day. Do any of you remember when Creekside had a Blessing of the Animals service here in our garden? There is still a blue plastic tub in the kitchen labeled Blessing of the Animals. We had dogs and cats and hamsters: someone even brought a goldfish in a bag to be sprinkled with holy water. What a day.

Now typically, Blessing of the Animals is a time when people bring their pets to be sprinkled with water and blessed. Although, when we did this at Creekside, I was holding our cat when Pastor David's dog showed up, and I got sprinkled with something stronger than water. But today I want to talk about how our pets are blessing to us. That's what I've asked some folks to share about. This idea came because of an email exchange over a period of several months with Marcia Sowles. Marcia grew up in Elkhart City Church, but moved away to become an attorney at the Department of Justice in Washington DC. She kept her parents' home in Elkhart, and visits at Creekside when she's in the area. She listened to one of my sermons online, and emailed me to ask for prayer for her and her cat, Teddy. Teddy had just been diagnosed with lymphoma. Teddy was obviously a significant part of Marcia's life.

Slide 1 Here's a picture of Marcia and Teddy. Here's what Marcia wrote:

Teddy was truly a blessing. I adopted him from the Arlington shelter in 2001. He greeted me at the door when I came home from work and always seemed to understand when I had a hard day or was sad. He slept by me at night. Even when he was losing his battle with lymphoma he would still give me kisses in the morning.

Slide 2 *I adopted Ford two weeks after Teddy died. He is very active and loves to play. I hope that we will share many years together.*

Slide 3 *Choir members will recognize Bruce Barwick's miniature schnauzer, Abbie. Abbie was an honorary member of the Creekside Choir. She wasn't much of a singer, but she was better behaved than some of the other members of the choir [that's my comment]. She was a wonderful companion to Bruce, and I got to see how she was trained to run on their treadmill. She passed away this spring, and Bruce still misses her very much.*

Slide 4 *This is from cat lovers Joe and Karen Kohler: It's a glorious feeling to sit in easy chairs in our living room, feet up on the coffee table and Christmas CDs playing in the background. But when cats climb up on our laps and fall asleep, THAT'S when we think we have a glimpse of what Heaven must be like.*

Slide 5 *Anne Griffith couldn't send just one picture of her cats! She says, For as long as I can remember, I have loved cats! I truly love all animals, but cats are easily my favorite. My long-time kitties; Rough & Tumble were brothers from a litter of barn cats on John & Jean Mann's property. I got them in 1996. They were great at snuggling and making me feel loved. They roughoused, would get into mischief, and play doing silly things. They taught me to be patient at times, and listened to all my troubles without complaint or rolling their eyes. Cats can be way better company than people! My current kitties are a mix of outdoor ferals and strays. Piglet, DJ Skinny Boots, and Pumpkin Light are a strange lot. I'm pretty sure I will always have cats around to keep me company.*

Slide 6 *This is Kurt Vardaman with Jazz, Kurt and Lisa's 3 year old cockapoo. Lisa writes when she and Kurt and got their first dog shortly after their 2nd anniversary, a close friend exclaimed that she would not need to worry about us now, because we had something besides ourselves to take care of. With the exception of about 5 months, we have always had at least 1 dog in our home over the last 28 years. Each dog has been a wonderful companion, as special and unique as people. Jazz keeps our daily routine from being dull. She is persistent when it comes to playtime and lifts our moods with her always happy nature and wagging tail. She loves to play tug-of-war, fetch, and to take Kurt outside for a walk, but as she ages, she is learning that sitting on a lap and snuggling is a good way to soothe our hurried souls.*

Slide 7 *This is my daughter Becca and one of our cats, Sultan. Sultan is proof that you don't have to be smart to be happy. (Becca is proof that you can be smart AND happy) Sultan is a simple soul who just wants attention in order to be content. He has been draped on my shoulders for every sermon I've written at my home computer, and he hasn't learned anything: except gratitude. He never forgets gratitude. Some people have not figured this out.*

I appreciate the folks who share pictures and stories: pets get us out, slow us down, remind us that there's more to life than just ourselves, and provide companionship and playfulness in our lives. These are blessings which we all need. We need to be reminded that in the

midst of tragedy and disaster and grief that there is still order and goodness in God's creation, and although we have a place in that creation, we are not God. We cannot control the world, but we can affirm the goodness that is in it. There is more to this world than what we hear in the headlines. This is the world God loved so much that sent his Son, Jesus, to be part of it with us. Thanks be to God.