

SLD09.19.10 25th Ordinary Blessing of the Animals
Emory Presbyterian Church
I Corinthians 1:18-31
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“Puppy Love”

Let’s pause now in the midst of the chaos of animals and visitors and our lives in general to see if we can hear a word from the Lord. Let’s listen together to this portion of the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, Greece, wherein he says – read I Cor. 1:18-31

In this text Paul is teaching, as he often does, about the sort of screwy, bass-ackward nature of God’s love, forever foolish-seeming to the wisdom of the world. Indeed, Paul points out how God is forever choosing what is foolish to bring the wise down a notch, what is weak to one-up the strong, what’s looney to pull the rug out from under the “cool and collected.”

This is the language of the cross, the lingua franca of the gospel – the scandalous, foolish, even absurd notion our all-powerful God dying on a tree. A self-giving love that’s hard to grasp; always has been, even for the most committed of Jesus’ disciples. Remember how Peter cried when Jesus spoke of his impending death: “This shall never happen to *you*, Lord!”

Today we come to God’s loony love language a different way – through the eyes and actions and affections of our pets, and of that inveterate animal-lover and fool for Christ, Francis of Assisi. Francis not only grasped but delighted in God’s foolish love, and was forever turning for examples of it to the animals around him.

Take a puppy, for example. What else *is* a puppy but a gnawing mouth and floppy paws and tumbly skin encasing boundless energy and sloppy love? A virtual

waterfall of affection, splattering as much outside the bowl as in, a puppy loves totally, indiscriminatingly, foolishly, anyone who so much as glances his way. That, Francis would say, is how God loves.

Only we don't really think all that highly of puppy love, do we. In fact, we regard it as so foolish that, with a certain knowing nod or roll of the eyes, we use the phrase to describe another sort of infatuation – you know – that heart-bursting, discombobulating, head-over-heels sort of love that catches us up and spins us around until we're smitten beyond reason. That's puppy love – fun while it lasts, though it never does. So in our steadier, more grounded, more mature moments, we don't really put much stock in it, do we.

Still, puppy love might be just the way Francis would describe the love of God – profligate, generous, indiscriminating, ever available. It's certainly how Francis felt about God, about life in general really. Walking around with a goofy wide open grin, hopeful, enthusiastic, relentlessly head-over-heels in love with life and the God who created it, which led to some really wacky behavior. Although Francis wasn't the only one of his age so peculiarly smitten.

Born in 1182 in the town of Assisi in the province of Umbria, Italy, Francis grew up in an era of passionate spiritual romanticism, when the imaginations of the literate were often captivated, even obsessed, by the mystical, quixotic tales of King Arthur and his round table, the quest for the Holy Grail, and the antics and adventures of those roving, lovesick European poets called the troubadours. So smitten was Francis with the gospel of Jesus Christ, he came to be called The Troubadour of God.

Spawn of a wealthy family, Francis was, by the age of 22, rich, famous, well-liked, and bored out of his ever-loving mind. Despite his privilege, or maybe because of it, he began to despair of the emptiness of his days and of his heart. Fragile in constitution, he became depressed and ill until one day when he had a dream, a vision, a romantic call to chivalry that, as one author puts it, “freed him from his own frozen will.”¹

Francis’ dream placed him in a dazzling palace where a radiant princess-bride held court. The walls of the palace were covered with shields and trophies of battles won. And in the dream, Francis asks aloud who the Lord of the castle is. A voice sings out, “it is the high court of Francis Bernardone and his followers.” Well, that was all it took for ole’ goofy, fragile, foolish Francis to festoon himself in knightly togs and go forth to seek his glory.

Now, in those days, the best way to go forth and seek glory was to join the papal armies in the Crusader campaign in the Middle East. The thing is, you know how dreams can sometimes be misinterpreted? Well, ole’ Francis, having neither the build nor the skill nor the disposition for war, made for a dismal soldier. So, having apparently acted too quickly and ended up serving his own desire for glory than God’s, he turns around and goes home.

Only knights don’t go home. Ever heard of Sir Lancelot checking in with his mom for so much as a change of underwear? Francis was mortified by his return and so were the citizens of Assisi. Embarrassed and humiliated, he withdrew to a cave up in the Umbrian hills and threw himself at the mercy of God, plumbing his own depths for a

¹ Bodo, Murray, Francis, The Journey and the Dream, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1988, p.5.

painful and terrifying look at his own weakness and sinfulness, delving deeply every day for that new heart that would fuel and direct his activities for the rest of his life. Once he emerges from his cave, Francis sets out once more as a knight, only this time dressed in a sackcloth robe with a cross chalked on the front and back. And this time, his quest is to live a holy life of joy, poverty and service.

This is how Francis feels about his new life, anyway. Most of the people around him just think he's silly. Or annoying. Or a harmless madman. But Francis holds everything in his heart with the enthusiasm of a child. From his nutty perspective, what he's doing is taking up residence in himself, becoming "a portable kingdom," if you will – ready to move along the highways of the world to bring people to Christ.

Instead of starting big, Francis begins to think small – a familiar theme to us by now. Instead of starting with forces and people outside, Francis starts with himself² and does everything in his power to recreate in his own person the life of Jesus on earth. Well aware that he can't do much on his own, yet Francis is convinced that God can transform him.

And what do you know but that Francis's head-over-heels, bumbling, stumbling response to God, together with his unbridled puppy love for Christ, becomes contagious and people started joining his odd adventure of putting God's Word into practice. A community of brothers forms around him, whom he promptly sends right back out again to challenge the pervasive complacency and smugness in the church of his day. And his prayer every day becomes that God give everyone the courage to be themselves instead of what others expect them to be."³

² Ibid., p. 34.

³ Ibid., p 40.

Now, look. St. Francis was a nut. Don't let anybody tell you different. But he was an inspired nut whose relationship with animals and people continues to teach us about the praise and wisdom and divine example of which even the most inconsequential of God's creatures are capable.

For example, there's the 13th century story first recorded by Thomas of Celano about St. Francis preaching to the birds of Spoleto Valley. One day when he and his buddies are traveling through the valley, Francis spots a great variety of birds nearby and, swept up in the moment (as he was inclined to get) he runs to the birds to greet them hand to wing. Then it strikes Francis to preach to the birds about their place in creation and he says,

“...brother and sister birds, you should praise your Creator and always love God: for God gave you feathers for clothes, wings to fly and all other things that you need. It is God who made you noble among all creatures, making your home in thin, pure air.”

At this the birds begin to spread their wings, as the story is told, to stretch their necks and gaze at Francis, rejoicing and praising God. So Francis walks right through them, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic, and giving them his blessing, after which they all fly off, and Francis skips off the way he was forever doing, rejoicing and giving thanks to God.⁴

Then there's the story of Francis's "come to Jesus" meeting with this wolf who for several years has been terrorizing the town of Gubbio. The villagers being afraid to leave the city walls, Francis goes out by himself to have a chat with the wolf. Out of the woods it charges, snarling and snuffling, jaws agape, teeth dripping, until Francis makes the Sign of the Cross, and it slows down and closes its mouth.

⁴ Ibid. "Stories of St. Francis," as retold by John Feister.

“You gotta cut that out!” says Francis to the wolf. “You’re upsetting people! How about you and I make peace with the people of Gubbio? You quit bothering them, and they quit bothering you.”

The wolf nods its head.

So Francis puts out his hand and asks the wolf to make a pledge. The wolf extends its front paw and places it into Francis’s hand. Together they go to town where Francis gives a sermon about the wondrous love of God and offers the townspeople peace on behalf of the wolf. In turn, they promise to feed him and otherwise let him be, and for two years that wolf lives in Gubbio. And when he dies, everybody’s sad because the formerly frightening wolf had become a living symbol of the power and providence of God, just as our pets can be to us today.

Are these stories about St. Francis true? Who know? But if you ask me, an occasional visit with the odd fool for Christ serves as a kind of tonic for us thoughtful, reasonable, heady, North American Presbyterians. As does an occasional romp in the yard with our dogs, or a cuddly curl up with our cats. For just as the Apostle Paul said to his new church in Corinth, “If we think that we are wise in this age, we should become fools so that we may become wise. (1 Cor. 3:18b-19)

You want to understand the theology of the cross, the loony love language of our self-giving God? Just gaze into the eyes of your favorite pet and see for yourself the foolish, yearning, weak, all-powerful, commanding, wise, love of God...for you...and for all creation.

To the glory of God. Amen.