

Francis of Assisi
Matthew 11:25-30

Talking to the Animals*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Good morning! First of all, I want to extend a warm welcome to all of our special and well-behaved guests who are visiting us today. I am so excited that they are here. What a wonderful way to celebrate the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi!

St. Francis is, of course, one of the most beloved of saints in the Christian tradition. He is known for a number of different things.

First, Francis is known as a reformer. As a young man, he heard the voice of Jesus telling him to “go and repair my house.” Francis came to realize that Jesus was calling him to reform and rebuild the scandal-filled medieval church. He ended up living a life of radical poverty and establishing the religious order that we know today as the Franciscans.

Second, Francis is known as a peacemaker. Many of you may know the song “Make Me a Channel of Your Peace.” This well-known song is based upon a prayer called the “Peace Prayer” and is attributed to Francis. The first few lines of this prayer are: “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring love. Where there is injury, pardon.” What important words to live by, especially in these turbulent times.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Francis is known for his love of all creation, including animals. Some of you may have seen the movie “Dr. Doolittle,” in which the title character is able to “talk to the animals.” (A bit of trivia: Dr. Doolittle was played by the famous actor Rex Harrison, who was a parishioner and lector at Transfiguration in the 1980s and served as a vice president of the Episcopal Actors’ Guild. There is a memorial plaque in Harrison’s honor at the back of the church.)

Anyway, long before Dr. Doolittle existed, there was St. Francis of Assisi talking to the animals. There is a wonderful story about Francis preaching to the birds. (That’s what the Giotto fresco portrays on the cover of our bulletin.) There is another story about Francis domesticating a ferocious wolf, the Wolf of Gubbio, who immediately stopped terrorizing the residents of that village after Francis spoke with him.

And one of Francis’ most famous writings is called the Canticle of the Sun, in which he addresses nature as his family members: brother sun, sister moon, mother earth,

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and even sister death. No element of the natural world was too small or insignificant for Francis' love and care.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus actually teaches us the same thing. Nothing is too small or insignificant for God's love and care. In fact, God often favors the ones who are overlooked or on the margins.

In our reading, Jesus tells us that God has hidden the truth from "the wise and the intelligent." Instead, God has revealed the truth to "infants." Jesus says, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants."

Now Jesus is not only talking about literal infants here. The Greek word used in this passage, *nepios*, does refer to infants or minors. But the word is also used metaphorically for anyone who is thought to be insignificant, looked down upon, or on the margins of society.

One of the unfortunate distinctions that we, as human beings, tend to draw is the distinction between humans (who are thought to be wise and intelligent) and animals (who are thought to be insignificant). In many ways, animals – as well as the rest of the natural world – are seen by our culture as *nepioi*, or metaphorical infants. In other words, animals can learn from us, but we could never learn from them.

But those of us who have been blessed with non-human members of our household know that this is not the case. St. Francis' interactions with the natural world is an important reminder that there is, in fact, much that we humans can learn from animals. This is something that I have come to realize during the eight years that Michael and I have been blessed with being caretakers to our beloved dog, Chartres.

You can tell that Chartres is a priest's dog because she is named after the medieval cathedral outside of Paris. Like me, she has Anglo-Catholic tendencies because she loves incense. After I come home from church on Sundays, she often will rub her head in my clothes that smell like incense. So I'm sure she's having a good time today!

As some of you know, I have spent a good portion of my life at theological institutions of higher learning. I spent nearly a decade, off and on, earning my doctorate in systematic theology. And I spent another four years teaching students as a professor in an Episcopal seminary. (Now Chartres was my faithful writing companion for many of those years, laying quietly next to me as I finished my dissertation as well as my book projects.)

As I reflected on today's gospel, I recognized the truth of Jesus' teaching. In some ways, I have learned more about God's love and living the gospel from Chartres than I did in all of my years in academia put together.

For example, I have learned about *faith* from the way in which Chartres waits patiently all day long – laying on her pad, staring at the front door, and confident in her belief that Michael and I will walk through that door each and every night after work.

I have learned about *hope* from the expectant look in her eyes after every walk as she looks forward to her delicious doggy-biscuit treat.

I have learned about *forgiveness* when I have forgotten at times to give her said delicious doggy-biscuit treat, and yet she still finds it in her heart to play with me.

I have learned about *joy* from the unrestrained jumping and wagging of her tail – as well as her barking and squeals of happiness – whenever we return from an extended trip.

I have learned about *love* from how she wants nothing more, at the end of the day, than to hang out with the rest of her pack (that is, us), and to snuggle with us on the living room couch.

Most of all, however, I have learned about the gift of *grace* from Chartres. One of the central sins for those of us who think of ourselves as “wise and intelligent” is the constant need to justify ourselves or to make ourselves worthy to God.

We human beings try endlessly to engage in works that we think will be pleasing to God. “If only I try harder, then God will love me more.” “If only I work harder, then God will love me more.” “If only I perform better, then God will love me more.” But that’s not how God works.

In fact, the irony is that the more we try to please God, the less we understand the message of grace. That is, God already loves us more than we could ever imagine, to the point of emptying himself on a cross. And so we don’t need to do a thing to earn that love. In fact, we can’t do anything to earn that love. The most that we can do is to say “thank you.” And that is the heart of the gospel message.

Chartres embodies the gift of grace. Yes, there are times in which she works hard to receive a treat. (We do make her sit, play bow, and stand so that she doesn’t get too spoiled.) But, in general, Chartres knows that she is loved. She does not spend much of her day – as many of us do – worrying about trying harder, working harder, or performing better. She just knows that she is loved. And that knowledge frees her simply to be Chartres – who God has created her to be.

The core message of today’s gospel and the feast day of St. Francis is that God loves all of creation more than we can ever imagine. As Jesus teaches us, God loves not just the wise and intelligent ones, but especially the *nepioi* – those who are often looked down upon and thought of as being insignificant.

Today, as we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, we give thanks for the fact that all of creation is infused with God's love. We give thanks for the *nepioi*, the so-called "insignificant" ones, who actually teach us how to live more deeply into our faith.

We give thanks for the animal companions in our lives – including Robert and Bertie – who give us such joy. And we remember our beloved animal companions who have left us – including Sully, Miss Kitty, Rossini, and Puccini – and who now rest in God's eternal love and care.