

Sermon for Sunday, October 6, 2013 Blessing of the Animals

A colleague reminded me of an old story about St. Francis of Assisi, whom we honor today as we bless the animals. In the little town of Gubbio in the Italian hills, the people were frightened. The town was being ravaged by a ferocious wolf. It was eating livestock and people alike.

The townspeople were terrified, huddled behind the safety of the town walls.

Then Francis of Assisi arrived, and heard what was happening and took pity on the people and the wolf, and decided to go out and talk to the wolf.

"No! No!" they shouted. "He'll destroy you!"

But he went anyway.

And he hadn't been out long, when this enormous wolf charged out of the bushes – growling and snapping his teeth. But Francis, eyes filled with pity and determination, made the sign of the cross over the charging wolf and said, "Come to me brother Wolf. I wish you no harm."

And the wolf knelt at his feet, meek as a lamb.

Then Francis spoke again to him, and got a little upset:

"Brother Wolf, what you've been doing is sin. You shouldn't be killing people. So stop it. I want to make peace between you and the people of Gubbio. They're not going to hurt you. But you can't hurt them either. Do you understand?"

Then the wolf looked up at him with sorrowful eyes and nodded his head with understanding and remorse. And he lifted up his paw and put it in Francis' hands.

"Good. All your past sins are forgiven." And Francis said, "Come on. Come with me. We've got some work to do."

And the wolf followed Francis into the town. And the people were amazed. And Francis spoke on behalf of the wolf. He explained what had happened and that the wolf was repentant, but

then said, "Will you forgive him? And will you promise to feed him?"

And the whole town agreed and made peace with him. And, just to show that the wolf understood, he again lifted his paw and placed it in Francis' hand as a sign of his pledge.

And from then on, the wolf lived in the village and walked from house to house and the people gave him food. Not even the dogs barked at him. He was just another member of the town of Gubbio. And he lived amongst them for another two years, until he died in peace.

That sounds like a story from Pixar or Disney, doesn't it? Just another fantastical fairy tale, made up to burnish the reputation of a saint. But apparently while workers were making renovations to the centuries-old church in Gubbio, they pulled up some of the stone pavers inside the church where people had been laid to rest. And there – amongst the other dead – were the remains of a very large wolf.

Hmmm. Maybe it's true, maybe not. But we do know that St Francis had a reputation for loving animals, even unlovable animals like rats and mosquitos. He saw them all as part of the whole of God's good creation. If we remember the creation story, it's pretty obvious that God created all the creatures and he was pleased with his creations. He called them all good, not just the so-called nice animals. And all of them, all of God's creation, were a reflection of God's love for humanity, which was charged with the responsibility to take care of all the creatures.

St. Francis understood this theology of creation, and lived it. He saw everything on the earth as a sign of who God is and how God loves us.

For most of us, our animal companions, be they dogs or doves, lizards or llamas, cats or chameleons, are creatures whom we love. They keep us company. They listen to our complaints. Their fur absorbs our tears. They tolerate our play and they keep us company. They teach us about love, that pure and unconditional love that God gives us. If we want to understand God, we should follow the lead of St Francis. Look to the animals. Look to God's creation. It is there that we see the sweet and diverse generosity of the Creator. It is there that we see acceptance regardless of our age or our abilities or our occasional bouts of bad temper. It is there that we learn how to love as God loved us so much that he provided all of Creation.

So today we honor our animal companions, and in doing so we honor the Creator God who made us all, both animals and humans. We thank God for this gift, so beautifully offered, and we pray for the grace to share that love with equal generosity to animals and to each other.

Amen.