

Living and Dying

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A homily for the Blessing of the Animals Service, Duke Chapel, October 2, 2011

Based on: Genesis 2:19-20a, Matthew 10:29-30

When I was asked to preach for today's service, I was uncertain how to answer. This is the first time I've been without an animal in my household for many years.

Earlier this year my husband and I made the difficult decision to euthanize our dear dog, River. She was in kidney failure and doing very poorly. Until now, every year when I participated in this service, my husband would come and bring River, a dark little dog, and sit here in the front, but not too far front, because he was worried she would recognize me.

So I thought about what to say if I were to accept the invitation to preach today, and it seemed that God was offering me the chance to speak about animals and how they teach us in their living and how they teach us also in their dying. It's these lessons I'd like to highlight today.

What do animals teach us in living?

First, animals teach us that work is good.

Work provides purpose. Watching the squirrels from my window, they are very busy compiling their winter stash. I understand that we can judge the coming winter weather by the trees shedding their nuts: the more that's shed, the worse the winter to come, the trees provide for the squirrels, they act in cahoots.

Would that we provide from our provisions for another and for their rainy day?

Second, animals teach us that play is good.

If work is good, play is even better. And in fact, a lot of work is play for animals. My dog River when visiting next door, would make a point of going to the toy basket of the next-door's dog and one by one, she would take each toy and hide it somewhere in his house. The next door dog would find his toys, and put them in new spots, where *he* wanted them, whereupon the owner would have to come through and place *all* the toys back in the basket. It was a game for three.

What *people* see as work could really be understood as "playing with others," if we let ourselves view it that way.

Third, animals teach us that love is good, especially in adversity.

Two horses stood neck to neck, nosing each other in a rain storm. No place to go, they made a shelter of love for each other by standing together in the rain. Adversity always tests us.

Character, they say is how one behaves when things don't go their way.

Better to be a friend, than to sulk alone in the rain.

If these are lessons animals teach us in living, what do animals teach us in dying?

First, animals don't complain. They may feel badly, but they don't despair over themselves.

Second, animals continue to give love. In other words, they don't give up.

They don't know what studies show about their chances for survival. They take life as it comes, and they don't fret over it. Meanwhile, they get on with doing what they were made to do.

Third, animals remain close to God's heart.

Whether or not they know God as we do, animals are also made by God. In fact, they were made first. Even before God put Adam and Eve in the Garden, God populated the planet with all manner of plants and animals. In the order of things, the animals came along before us humans and therefore hold a special place in God's heart.

In fact, God felt animals were so important that the first task God gives to Adam is to name the animals. This puts them in a relationship. That relationship between human and animal continues. Animals have kept their part. (Have we?)

Fourth, death brings animals back to God.

Scripture tells us God redeems all creation. When we hear that not a hair falls from our own heads without God knowing and caring, we are pretty close to the length God goes to know us and love us.

Scripture's Old Testament stories tell how God loves Israel so much, that God redeems Israel through Moses, and the New Testament, the Christian story, tells how God deeply loves by redeeming the world through Jesus Christ.

God's entire story is to create, to love and to redeem, that is, to bring us all home. So too with the animals, precious in God's sight,

All these lessons God provides for us so aptly through the animals.

In living: that work is good (and it's good to share); that play is good (and work can be play); and that love is good (especially in adversity).

In dying, we learn not to despair over ourselves, to continue giving love and to rest in confidence that in living or in dying, we remain close to God's heart.

Why do we bless these animals? Because they bless us and reveal to us lessons about life, lessons about death, and lessons about love.

We are indeed, blessed.

Robin Arcus

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