

SERMON
“Dr. Doolittle Meets Jesus”
Isaiah 64:17-25
Sunday, April 22, 2018

The story is told of the little town in the Italian hills that 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 townspeople. 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.

Francis spoke: “Good. All your past sins are forgiven.”

And Francis further 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. And he lived amongst them for another two years, until he died in peace.

Did it really happen? Did the wolf really understand Francis and make a pact with the whole village? It sounds ridiculous – like Dr. Doolittle meets Jesus.

But apparently while workers were making renovations to the centuries-old church within that small Italian town, 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.

St. Francis is popularly known as the saint who loved animals. But he was so much more than that. Beneath his love of animals; beneath his love of the poor; Francis was described as “a man overwhelmed by the goodness of a loving God... He was a mystic whose faith had so transformed his vision that he perceived that the entire world was [filled] with the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator.”

When Francis saw the animals, when he saw the poor, they were for him living symbols of God himself. And he saw in them not just symbols of God, but fellow creatures of God who, like him, were called to love God. So, yes, he preached to the birds, and tamed the wolf because all of creation was made to live in the love and adoration of the God who made them. Francis knew himself to be brother to all of creation, because all of creation is born of one Father.

Centuries before Francis, there lived a prophet – Isaiah – who envisioned the day when God’s salvation would be complete, when the violence of this world would be banished. In Chapter 65 Verse 25 of his book Isaiah writes; “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, he wrote....They shall not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

Amidst a world wracked by hatred and death, the wolf's encounter with St. Francis of Assisi is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God where former enemies may live side-by-side in peace. This, I believe, is God's desire for us.

I suspect that for many of us, these glimpses of the Kingdom of God come through our pets. We come home from a hard day at work or we've just had an upsetting phone call from a family member and our pets are there to welcome us home with a love that knows no bounds. They greet us with a meow and a rub against our legs. Or they wag their tails and eagerly kiss our face with a lick of the tongue. Whatever it is that they do to welcome us home we know we are unconditionally loved— we are loved just as we are. Their unflagging loyalty, following us from room to room, speaks a truth to our hearts that we are worth following.

When we get down on our knees and bury our faces in their faces and speak ridiculous words of devotion and affection [Who's the good dog? Yes, you're a good dog. Yes you are...], these pets recover in us our belief that we, too, can love freely and without shame. They release in us the freedom to be who we want to be.

Our pets reveal what we hope and long to be true, for us and for the world around us. It's not just the existential longing of poets and philosophers; it's a longing made real and tangible through flesh and fur; slobbering tongue and contented cat's purr.

May the freedom and love and acceptance we know through our pets be living sacraments for us, giving life and pulse to that longing we have for God and the Kingdom of God.

When we don't want to stand up and dislodge the cat that's asleep in our lap, may we perceive what it means to be at rest in the lap of God who wants us to remain in the peace of his love.

When we've said cruel and unspeakable things to the people we love, and are still greeted with unbounded joy by our dogs, may we perceive what it means to be received by the God who has forgiven our sins and only knows us as his beloved.

May our pets help us to become like St. Francis, that we may hope and live into the Kingdom of God where all are at peace, where all are loved, and none are hurt or destroyed.