

Welcome to our regular parishioners, and a special welcome to our children, our dogs, cats, and every species of animal. You are all welcome in this sacred space and this time of worship. We all belong here to one another.

This morning I would like to tell you a story about an amazing man named Francis. Francis was born into a very wealthy family. Some may even say that he was spoiled as a teenager. He drank a lot of wine and went to parties, and he even stayed out way past curfew. He was also a little conceited. When war broke out, even though he didn't have any experience as a soldier, Francis was quick to join because he thought of course he would succeed.

But as many could have predicted, soon after Francis went to war he was captured and put in prison, but something unusual happened while he was there. God started showing up in Francis' dreams, and something started changing in him. When Francis was finally released from prison, he was riding his horse back home to Assisi in Italy and came upon a man with leprosy— a terrible skin disease that people were deathly afraid of getting. But instead of being afraid and riding off as fast as he could, Francis looked at this man, and guess who he saw? He saw the very person of Jesus!

I wonder what you would do if you saw Jesus?

Francis jumped off his horse, embraced this man, and kissed him! Francis had been so moved to compassion and humility that after this happened, he gave up all his family money and personal possessions in order to live as simply as possible. People started calling him "God's Fool". And many even thought he was crazy. But Francis had seen how we are all God's special creations and he wanted to live more connected to people he would have normally avoided. Francis didn't think of himself as better than or above anyone or anything, because for Francis, all of creation was like different relationships in the same family, only his family was not just people but also animals and nature. He called the Sun his Brother and the Moon his Sister.

What if we didn't see the sun and moon and stars or trees or anything that God created as being so different from us, but instead saw everything as being something that we are related to, something within our own family. I wonder how our world might be different?

In our Gospel reading today 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."

We often think we have to be older and smarter to understand things. But maybe we really need to be more like a kid, who understands their interdependence with others, who spends time outside playing in and with nature, who talks to animals like their friends. Or maybe we need to be more like the animals who follow their instincts and don't overcomplicate things. And while we may not call them wise and intelligent by our human standards, they have so much wisdom to reveal to us.

I can see that many of you brought a special animal to our service today. And I assume that means they play a special role in your life. Our adopted animals become important parts of our family. I have a special cat named Lily. I like to think that Lily chose me to be her human mom. When I adopted her at a shop in Philadelphia, Lily came right over to me, reached her paws up, gave a little "mew" and looked adoringly into my face, and I knew, this was the kitten God was pairing me with. Over the last five years Lily has been my companion in moving across the country several times. She has comforted me when I am sad, and she has brought me joy and playfulness. I have also had to learn how to respect Lily for who she is: She has her own feelings and needs and things that make her angry, and I have to remember that she isn't in this world just for me. She has her own wild spirit and her own instincts. So, like Francis, our adopted animals can become our teachers and friends and companions, and we can see them as their own wild beings who are also carrying out their purpose in the world, and are also unique sparks of God's Divinity.

In a few moments Mark and I will be blessing your animal friends. In doing so, we are acknowledging them as God's creation that we are in relationship with on this earth, and we are asking God to protect and watch over them. While this blessing is very special, giving blessings is something that we can all do at any time, with one another and the animals in our lives. So as we celebrate St Francis Day, I invite you to make blessing animals one of your regular spiritual practices. Next time you see an animal on a walk or at a friends' house, say hi to them like they are one of your kin. If the animal is friendly, take time to give them a pat on the head or rub on the tummy. Try talking to your animal with compassion and authenticity or comforting them when they are sad. Try praying out loud for your animal before you both go to bed. And try standing in awe of an animal you see in nature, wild and free, knowing that God created every living thing, and we all belong here to one another.