

HOMILY: Blessing of the Animals Service
October 9, 2016
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

Job 12:7-10

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

Luke 15:3-6

So Jesus told them this parable: Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'

The first reading from Job says, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you." I am reminded of a list of great lessons we can learn from dogs and their behavior:

When loved ones come home, always run to greet them.

Never pass up the opportunity to go for a joyride.

Allow the experience of fresh air and the wind in your face.

Take naps.

Stretch before rising.

Run, romp, and play daily.

Thrive on attention and let people touch you.

Avoid biting when a simple growl will do.

On warm days, stop to lay on your back in the grass.

On hot days, drink lots of water and lay under a shady tree.

When you're happy, dance around and wag your entire body.

Delight in the simple joy of a long walk.

Be loyal.

Never pretend to be something you're not.

When someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit close by, and nuzzle them gently.

If what you want lies buried, dig until you find it.

Indeed, animals are teachers and have wisdom from which we humans can learn. Animals are inherently spiritual beings.

I love the car magnet or bumper sticker that is a paw print and inside it says, "Who rescued who?"

In the Luke passage today, Jesus asks who, having 100 sheep and losing one, will not leave the 99 to go to find the one lost sheep?

This idea may have seemed odd to Jesus listeners, and perhaps even to us today, to think of abandoning the 99 sheep to find the one. Economically, this may not have seemed a practical choice. May be safer to stick with the 99 than risk losing more of them while looking for the one. But God is not concerned with economics when it comes to searching for the lost.

Jesus is highlighting the individuality, the uniqueness of each of God's precious creatures, and that every single one matters. That there is no resting until every one is back safely in the pen with the flock. He is telling us that this searching is what God does for us. God never gives up on us, even when we wander far, far away. God will continue searching until we are found, and we are always welcomed home with rejoicing. This is how much God cares for each of us and our well-being.

Last year was our inaugural Blessing of the Animals service, and I'm grateful that it went so well that the congregation was willing and eager to do it again. My 11 year-old dog, Brady, was here last year. Every other dog (we only had dogs last year) seemed perfectly reverent and well-behaved, and Brady just could not seem to settle, he was so distracted by the other dogs. He paid no attention to the blessing – not interested in that at all.

Brady died in May from congestive heart failure, and our family experienced tremendous grief over this great loss. It was like a dark cloud came over our house. I watched longingly and painfully out the window as neighbors walked with their beloved furry friends. I missed Brady and our routines so much. I missed him greeting me at the door, I missed him jumping up on my lap, I missed our hikes and walks on the beach. I missed looking into his eyes. I missed his steady and devoted companionship. I felt lost without him.

I began searching for another dog, obsessively looking for a replacement, knowing there would never be a replacement. I drove all over Marin, meeting dogs. No dog seemed like the right dog for us. I guess I'm just not meant to have another dog, I thought.

Well, I met a woman who rescues dogs, and she told me she was going to the Bakersfield animal shelter to bring some back to Marin who would otherwise be euthanized, and there was one I might like, a cute little black dog, she said. This woman had never met nor seen Brady, my dog who had recently died. When she rang the door bell a few days later, and I opened the door and she handed me the dog, I felt like I was the one who had been lost and then found. I felt like I was the one who had been rescued. The dog looked so much like my other dog, Brady, and

my friends thought it WAS Brady. One person said that as a pastor, it was my first miracle -- I had brought Brady back to life. I felt like it was the other way around -- I was the one brought back to life. We named her Gracie and she's here today, thanks be to God. Gracie was a runner -- she bolted a number of times out the front door and so far, she has always managed to find me.

I know there are other rescue stories here today -- animals you have rescued, or animals that have rescued you. The Good News today is that God finds us when we are lost. If you are feeling lost today, know that God is searching for you, and won't give up. This is what God does -- God rescues. All we need to do is trust in God's grace and know that we will be found.

We are so deeply enriched by our relationship with animals. Animals and pets are such a blessing to our lives. Let us give thanksgiving for them now, by bringing them forward for an individual blessing.