

St. Francis Sunday ~ October 3, 2010 ~ A homily preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at Old St. Andrew's Church, Bloomfield, CT

Galatians 6.14-18; Psalm 147.7-14; Matthew 11.25-30

This is a special Sunday. The day when we celebrate St. Francis. Some of you may know a lot about the man from Assisi. He was born in 1182 and spent the early years of his life partying and trying to win military glory. He succeeded at the former but failed at the latter.

The eyes of his consciousness opened when he began to encounter beggars and lepers on the streets of Assisi. In 1210, Pope Innocent III confirmed the simple rule for the Order of Friars Minor, the monastic order devoted to serving the poor founded by Francis. They were called Friars Minor because Francis wanted to emphasize his desire to be numbered among the "least" of God's servants.

The Order grew rapidly all over Europe and is still active today. Francis died in 1221 at the age of 39 and was canonized seven years later. Of all the saints, Francis is probably the most well known and popular. Although he left few writings, he is well remembered for his joy-filled spirit and love of animals.

Speaking of animals, I imagine that many of you have had animals at one time or another—a dog, cat, gerble, chameleon, a goat, or perhaps a couple llamas. I have a calico cat now. Her name is Chloe and she's both cute as a button and obnoxious as pig at a debutante party. I've actually had lots of animals over the years, especially on my farm in Maine—there were the 16 Horned Dorset ewes and Stewball the ram, 3 or 4 pigs each year, dozens of chickens (Rhode Island Reds and Barred Plymouth Rocks for eggs and Leghorns as meat birds), cats-a-bunch in the barn, lots of dogs, and, of course, 5 horses. I'd just like to say something about four of these critters because, in the spirit of Francis, I count them among my greatest teachers.

Let me start with Nina. Nina was an old ewe who still produced twin lambs every year. Cantankerous and clever, Nina was the boss-ewe in the pasture. All the other ewes and their lambs did whatever Nina did, which is to say they followed her where ever she went. Now, some of you might remember a sermon I preached one time about the fancy-dancy Australian mega-volt electric fence I got to keep my sheep in the pasture. It had multiple wires strung close together near the ground and carried a jolt of electricity that stopped my heart the one time I touched it by mistake. I was proud as

punch the day I brought my sheep home and let them out of the truck in that freshly fenced pasture.

Next morning, I sat at the kitchen table drinking my coffee at about 5.30 and surveyed the beautiful green field with the ½ acre pond just below my farmhouse. Lovely. Especially lovely because there, dotted across that emerald green pasture, were my woolly white ewes. Man was I a proud Papa. Then, I took another sip of Joe but almost choked. Sheep. Sheep by the pond. Wait a minute. The fancy-dancy Australian mega-volt electric fence was on the other side of the barn and the sheep were supposed to there!, not around the pond.

The makers of that fancy-dancy Australian mega-volt electric fence never told Nina that she should be wary of it. She simply put her head under the bottom wire and pushed up. Her woolly neck and back insulated her perfectly from that fancy-dancy Australian mega-volt electrified wire. She took two steps and was through. The other ewes followed Nina. I saw it happen many times.

So, let me tell you what Nina taught me. *The grass is never greener on the other side of the fence.* The reason I know this for sure is because Nina and the rest of the flock would pull the exact same caper and go back into the fold when they reencountered the fence from the other side. After a month, I just turned the fence off, opened the gate, and the sheep went where ever they wanted to.

Turkey. Now, he was a rooster! Turkey was an old orphan bantam rooster who ended up in our chicken house. It's always good to have a rooster in and around the barnyard. He wakes you up, fertilizes the eggs, and rules the roost. Turkey was named Turkey by my son. Burr, maybe age 4, knew that this bird wasn't a hen—he sure didn't look like the girls—but he must have forgotten, or never knew, the word rooster. When we first got the chicken coop set up and all the feathered occupants home, he simply proclaimed, "Hey Dad, that turkey sure makes a loud noise."

What did Turkey teach me? For a little guy, Turkey could hold his own with our fifty ground scratching, worm eating hens and meat birds. Fleet of foot and wing, he managed to stay one step ahead of the hens and so keep his place at the top of the roost. *Turkey never stopped being himself. He came to work every day, did his job, and never complained.*

You know that Dog spelled backwards is God. Man's best friend, right? I bought a pure-bred lab from my cousin Lorraine McDougall the summer I

was discharged from five years as a Navy search and rescue pilot. I named him SAR for search and rescue. SAR was the kind of dog who would take a biscuit from my lips so gently I felt like I was being kissed. He'd lie in a ball by the woodstove at night and be the first to greet me in the morning when I came down to stoke the stove. When we walked in the woods and he'd take off after a rabbit or squirrel, I just needed to whistle once and he'd be right back by my side. If he ever misbehaved at home, all I'd to do was snap my fingers and point to the floor by my feet. Down he'd go.

SAR taught me about loyalty and faithfulness. Dogs, of course, are known for their loyalty, but people aren't. Having this unquestioning partner inspired my own sense of loyalty towards others. It was a good thing. As for faithfulness, SAR had faith in me, that I would rub his ears, take him with me into the woods, and feed him. Having faith, I came to learn isn't as much an active endeavor as it is letting go of doubt and fear, knowing that all is well and all will be well and all manner of things shall be well.

My greatest teacher, however, was Meggie. She weighed in at 2,200 pounds, was taller than I am, had hooves the size of my children's heads, and could down a bail of hay and four gallons of water for breakfast. A Bay Percheron-Belgian mix, she had the best of each breed—the huge neck and shoulders of a Percheron but low to the ground like a Belgian.

What was most special about Meggie, though, was her disposition. She was unbelievably patient. When I'd go off in the woods to cut or wander away to track a moose, she'd stay stock still with the reins looped over the hames for five minutes or an hour. As Meggie knew a lot more about twitching wood than I did, she would calmly and kindly guide me in the ways of woods work. I had to trust her and I did. And work. Oh my God could she work. *There's much more to say about Meggie, but for now, her lessons to me were about working hard, trusting, and, above all, patience.*

No doubt your animals have given you great joy, too. What's so easy to forget is that God's creation is not human-centered. We human critters are human-centered but we are only one element of Earth's beauty and bounty. Now, this is exactly when our friend Dick Watson would want me to mention the Earth Charter and so I will.

The Earth Charter embraces a holistic approach to and attitude about our planet—creatures great and small, water, the skies and air, the lands and their minerals. It's a clarion call for sustainable development to replace exploitation for profit only. The fundamental values and principles of the Earth Charter are to respect and care for the community of Life; ecological

integrity; social and economic justice; and democracy, non-violence and peace. These positions have been affirmed by the Episcopal Church, dozens of organizations, States and cities, and many countries around the world.

In the spirit of Francis, and our animal teachers, consideration of the Earth Charter as a part of our spirituality and Christianity is vitally important. The very future of our existence depends upon shifting our consciousness and attitudes. Like Apollo 11, you only get one chance to land and you'd better do it right. Not only does this matter for us, it matters for the planet and the Ninas, Turkeys, SARs and Meggies of the world, too. I have no doubt that Francis would have been a champion of the Earth Charter were he alive today.

Amen.

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