

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X32
St. Francis Sunday 8:30 & 11:00 a.m. Eucharist Pet Blessing
Sunday 1 October 2017
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Jeremiah 22:13-15
Psalm 148:7-14
Galatians 6:14-18
Matthew 11:25-

Why Do We Bless Animals?

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11).

On Monday afternoon I was riding my bicycle up California Street when I saw a friend who I've known for twenty years. We stopped to talk and I invited him to today's celebration of St. Francis (1181/2-1226) the patron saint of our city. He told me that he would not be here in a way that puzzled me. He wasn't going out of town or doing something else. Finally he just said it. "I grew up in the South on a farm and I believe animals shouldn't be in church."

This morning I want to think with you about a simple question, "Why do we bless animals in church?" I'm going to begin by talking about two ways that human beings have understood animals and then go on to the effects of these views and conclude with a kind of theology for our connection to other species.

1. In twelfth century Western Europe thinkers struggled with the question of universals. They asked whether the primary existing thing is a particular object, or whether the general category comes first. For instance, does our reality come from participating in humanity which shapes and forms us? Or are individuals the primary reality from which our concept of the universal is derived? We may have a hard time even understanding these debates because of our modern tendency toward individualism.

St. Francis in many respects rephrased the question, "What is ultimately real." Instead he asked, "Where should our attention be if we want to grasp the most significant thing about God, the world and ourselves?"¹ Francis believed that we meet God when we are not distracted by wealth, when we serve people who are suffering, and when we dedicate ourselves to worship and prayer. He also believed that we come in relation to God through our encounter with other beings. People remember Francis as a person who loved and even spoke to animals.

The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) also took seriously the idea that animals have their own inner life. He delighted in the way they have a different perception of the world. He writes, "When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a

pastime to her more than she is to me?... We entertain each other... If I have my time to begin or refuse, so has she hers."²

This view of Francis and Montaigne has been bitterly criticized over the years by thinkers like René Descartes (1596-1650). Montaigne and Descartes lived in the midst of and aftermath of terrible religious wars. They each had a very different reaction. Montaigne emphasized the multiplicity of perspectives (even among humans and animals). Descartes longed for absolute certainty.

Montaigne philosophized by writing about his cat and noticed many ways that animals are superior to us. Descartes famously sat alone before a fire and tried to forget everything so that he could get down to the most irrefutable foundations of human knowledge. "Cogito ergo sum. I think therefore I am."

Descartes was a dualist who concluded that the world is made up of two kinds of things: body and mind, the physical and the spiritual. For him, only humans have a conscious, immaterial mind. According to Descartes animals lack souls and do not truly think. They are machines programmed to run, eat, drink, yawn, sneeze, hunt, bark and care for their young. He believed that they have no inner life.³

2. Sometimes it seems as if Descartes' view has been the dominant one through human existence. Yuval Harari in his book *Sapiens* calls us, "the deadliest species in the annals of biology."⁴ He points out that this happened long before the Industrial Revolution and even before what he calls the Cognitive Revolution when human beings learned to write, cultivate land, use iron tools or inventions like the wheel.

Long ago all human species lived on the Afro-Eurasian landmass. The evidence is fairly convincing that homo sapiens wiped out our nearest humanoid cousins. At that time the world, especially the Outer World which had no humans, had an extraordinary diversity of land animals. Massive extinctions occurred when humans arrived.

Australia had a marsupial lion, flightless birds twice the size of ostriches, 450 pound kangaroos and a two and a half ton wombat. Of the 24 Australian animal species weighing one hundred pounds or more, 23 went extinct.⁵

Our ancestors crossed the first land bridge into Alaska 16,000 years ago. At first, until 12,000 BC glaciers blocked their way. In only 2,000 years humans colonized two continents all the way down to the island of Tierra del Fuego. When they arrived they discovered mammoths, mastodons, rodents the size of bears, herds of horses and camels, saber-toothed tigers, lions and dozens of species totally unlike what we have

today. We had giant ground sloths that weighed up to eight tons and reached a height of twenty feet.

North America lost 34 of its 47 genera of large mammals. South America lost 50 out of sixty. This is not to even mention thousands of smaller species that were lost. This first wave of extinctions happened before the beginning of cities. The second wave occurred through the spread of farming and the third wave arises out of industrialization.⁶ With rising concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere we are changing the planet in ways that we cannot fathom.

Animals useful to humans have had a different experience. It is important to recognize that not many wild animals are even capable of being domesticated. Out of 148 big wild terrestrial herbivorous species of mammals only 14 were domesticated before the twentieth century. 9 of these became livestock animals in a limited geographical area. 5 species of mammals have become widespread around the world: cows, sheep, goats, pigs and horses.⁷

While thousands of species have been extinguished the animals humans find useful have proliferated. But their evolutionary success is utterly meaningless. The lifespan of a chicken is 7-12 years. Cattle naturally live between 20-25 years. When these animals are raised for food many are killed after having lived only a few weeks to a few months. A milk cow lives five years before being slaughtered. During that time it is almost constantly pregnant with its calves separated from her at birth. Most industrial farm animals lead nightmarish lives. They are confined, physically uncomfortable and afraid. Their natural instincts are thwarted and social connections severed.⁸ The prophet Jeremiah says, "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness" (Jer. 22).

3. There is a great deal at stake in this debate about the spirituality of animals with Francis and Montaigne on one side and Descartes on the other. But there is more to this than the debt we may owe for extinguishing so many other creatures or our treatment of animals today. Animals have spiritual importance for us.

At the heart of our life is a longing for delight. St. Augustine teaches that this delight moves us to what is good. We can experience this joy in God's creation and in our encounter with creatures who differ from us.

The German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) writes that, "If humankind could have known about God without the world, God would never have created the world."⁹ Our encounter with other beings matters for our spiritual life.

In John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* Satan walks on earth and talks about how God is at the center of everything. God's spirit is in the earth, "productive in herb, plant and nobler birth / Of creatures animate with gradual life / Of growth, sense, reason, all summed up in man. / With what delight I could have walked thee round, / If I could joy in aught, sweet interchange / Of hill and valley, rivers, woods and plains... But neither here (on earth) seek I, no nor in heav'n / To dwell..." Instead what Satan seeks is "others to make such / As I... For only in destroying I find ease / To my relentless thoughts..."¹⁰

Satan longs so much for power over others that he cannot experience delight. Perhaps our society has become too much like that also. We fail to appreciate the wonder of creation.

A few weeks ago I was surfing alone at Ocean Beach by Sloat Avenue. A rode a long beaker into thigh deep water and turned to paddle out again. And not five yards away a Sea Lion popped out of the water. Her face had a look of total surprise that is just as vivid to me now as when she appears. We recognized something in each other.

Cynics have long said that pets love us only for our food. Recently scientists using MRI scanning equipment have determined that this is wrong. Mostly our pets actually love us for us. It turns out that Descartes is wrong. Animals have rich inner lives. They cannot tell us much about them in words but their brains respond in the same way that ours do. In fact dogs' brains have evolved to recognize faces.¹¹

So what are we to do with our speechless and religionless fellow beings? Last week we had my former teacher Margaret Miles as our Forum. In her book about her husband Owen's dementia she writes about how demoralizing it felt for her. Owen was a priest and theologian who prayed and read scripture every day of his life. She writes that at first she felt, "deeply shaken to see how little his religion seemed to help him" as the dementia advanced. Over time she realized that, "those who love the dying person must carry on religious practice on his or her behalf... *Not knowing* if he remembers, recognizes, feels or understands the rituals we shared."¹²

Why do we bless animals? We bless them because we believe that they are not machines and because we have done them such great harm? We bless the wild animals who range just beyond our conscious awareness. We bless the animals who recognize us when we come home and who love us. We bless them for the deepest desires in our hearts that make this mysterious creation our home. We bless them and pray on their behalf for the love of God. And they bless us.

¹ Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 152, 159.

² Cited in Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live, or, A Life of Montaigne: In One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (NY: Other Press, 2010) 136.

³ *Ibid.*, 134-9.

⁴ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (NY: Harper, 2015) 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 71-74.

⁷ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (NY: Norton, 1997) 157-175.

⁸ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (NY: Harper, 2015) 91-97.

⁹ Meister Eckhart, "Consideravit Semitas, Sermons on Proverbs 31:27," *The Complete Works of Meister Eckhart*. Tr. Maurice Walsh (NY: Crossroads, 2009) 275. Richard Rohr 9/28/17.

¹⁰ productive in herb, plant and nobler birth / Of creatures animate with gradual life / Of growth, sense, reason, all summed up in man. / With what delight I could have walked thee round, / If I could joy in aught, sweet interchange / Of hill and valley, rivers, woods and plains, / Now land, now sea, and shores with forest crowned, / Rocks, dens, and caves; but I in none of these / Find place or refuge; and the more I see / Pleasures about me, so much more I feel / Torment within me, as from the hateful siege / Of contraries; all good to me becomes / Bane, and in heav'n much worse would be my state. / But neither here (on earth) seek I, no nor in heav'n / To dwell, unless by mastering heav'n's Supreme; / nor hope to make myself less miserable / By what I seek, but others to make such / As I though thereby worse to me redound: / For only in destroying I find ease / To my relentless thoughts

John Milton, *Paradise Lost: An Authoritative Text Backgrounds Sources Criticism* ed. Scott Elledge (NY: Norton, 1975) 186-7.

¹¹ Claudia Dreifus, "Gregory Berns Knows What Your Dog Is Thinking (It's Sweet)," *The New York Times*, 8 September 2017.

¹² Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Long Goodbye: Dementia Diaries* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017) 70