

October 8, 2023

# The Nineteenth Sunday of Pentecost

**Feast of St. Francis**

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How do we come to love God, that invisible source of life and energy, that sustains us and yet hides behind the cloak of invisibility? It is quite natural to speak of praying to God, opening our hearts to God, but how do we come to love this One whom we've never seen? We've known people who've surrendered themselves to this life and loving energy, but it remains abstract and distant for most of us. How can we come to not just love life - our spouse, our parents and our children, our neighbor - but love the Source of Life that gives all else life? How can a fragile creature bound to live in three dimensions of space and time come to love the infinite, grow intimate with, the One who created all dimensions, and subsists immaterially beyond space and time? These are big questions. But I want to let the little creatures who've joined us this morning guide our answer.

We are gathered on St. Francis' feast day because we have all experienced a miracle in our lives, the miracle of having a friend who is an animal. It is a relatively common miracle, of course, but that doesn't make it any less wondrous, that we can be intimate with these creatures who are in many ways so different from ourselves. They are not like our other friends. We cannot have a conversation with them; we cannot explain things to them or ask their opinion or advice; we cannot talk to them about our predicament of loving the Source of Life that gives all life. Today we gather not just to bless our animals as a community, but to bless our friendships with our animal friends. All of us gathered know the wondrous experience of looking into the eyes of an animal friend and recognizing that we understand each other perfectly, that heart is speaking to heart without need for words.

Intimacy across the barrier that divides one species from another – that is a gift of love, as I think we all know. But in calling it a miracle, I am saying something more: it is a sign that points to the invisible God. A miracle is a special event that somehow opens our eyes so we can see God more clearly; it touches our hearts so we can find our way closer to God. And so it is with this miracle of our friendship with the animals. So the question I want to ask now is this: what is it about this amazing experience we all share, of having a real friendship with an animal, that helps us understand God better?

I'll tell you a story of a great Jewish teacher named Martin Buber, who grew up in Ukraine a little more than a hundred years ago. As a boy, Martin worked for a time on a farm, where part of

his job was to groom the horses, to brush their coats and comb their manes and tails. He loved that job, as probably most kids would, and he grew to love one pony in particular. One day, as Martin was grooming his special pony, he realized that the horse cared for him, too. It wasn't just that he liked being brushed, or he liked the apples and carrots Martin brought. Beyond all that, the pony actually like Martin. Martin felt the horse's affection for him; he felt loved by that pony.

Now Martin was a very smart boy, but he was better than plain smart. He was someone whose head was connected to his heart, and both of those were connected to God. So Martin's friendship with the pony gave him an idea about God. He realized that the pony was teaching him something about God's love for him. That may sound weird to you, but think about it. One of the things we learn from our friendships with animals is that real love does not depend on similarity. Love can cross the boundary between species and unite beings who are fundamentally different one from the other: a horse and a boy or a girl; a cat and an old man; a poodle and a middle-aged widow.

What Martin saw is that all those small miracles of love between two fundamentally different beings are little models of the great love that connects us with God. When you think about it, God is even more different from us than animals are. After all, we and the animals are creatures; God alone is the Creator. We and the animals all have needs; we are in many ways dependent on others; God alone has no needs. We inhabit these small and sometimes frail bodies; God's boundless power and presence extend through the whole universe. God is really quite unlike us humans – most of all because of the huge difference that sin makes in our lives. All of us, deliberately or not, do things that hurt ourselves and others, and we live with the consequences. But God's life is perfect – perfect love, unscarred by sin.

If, then, God is so different from us, how can we dare to say that God is close to us, that God loves us and we love God, back to that original question? Christians often say that, in Jesus Christ, God comes to us as a friend and brother, but are we just kidding ourselves? One ancient theologian said, "God is closer to me than I am to myself." How could that possibly be true? Well, Martin Buber would answer us, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you."

We've just heard that line from the book of Job, and that

is what Martin, the horse-groomer who grew up to be a great theologian, used to say when people asked him whether there can really be love between us and the God who created heaven and earth. "Ask the animals, and they will teach you." Look into the eyes of your animal friend, put your ear next to his or her heart, and ponder the miracle of love that binds us to these creatures who are so different from ourselves. And gradually, let that little miracle teach you about the great miracle that holds our souls in life, the miracle of love that binds each of us frail creatures to the Great Lord of Life. The distance between between us – we 3dimensioned creatures of clay and time – and the immaterial Lord of time, isn't simply bridged through intellect or meditation or acts of human service, it is bridged through every scratch, every nuzzle, every purr, every treat offered, every evening shared, every "whose a good girl?" – the incomprehensible difference between here and eternity might be best bridged by our efforts to love those different than us in time.

I'll sit down. Ask the animals and they will teach you.