

All God's Critters – A Service of Blessing

September 30, 2018

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

OPENING WORDS

Our circle this morning is unusual and precious, including – as it does – some of the creatures who have shared, and some who continue to share, our lives and homes and hearts. This Sunday we are reminded not only of our absolute love and gratitude for the blessing of these creatures, but also of all those we too easily overlook: not just the pets, but the wild ones, the earthbound ones, the flying ones; the ones that swim or crawl or burrow. The world of nature is brimming and vulnerable and beautiful and astonishing. So easily distracted by our human cares, let us take the time this morning to fill our hearts with awareness and gratitude for all those with whom we share this earth, finding hope and renewed commitment to their presence as much as our own.

(adapted from the Animal Blessing Service at First Church Providence)

STORY FOR ALL AGES Not Norman

A story about a pet goldfish who turns out to be the perfect pet.

SONG “All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir,” by Bill Staines

READING

Animals, all creatures, have so much to teach us if we are willing to listen, to share this time of ours knowing we are all in it together. They bless us with their wisdom, when we are smart enough to pay attention!

How they bless us –

“To Learn from Animal Being,” by John O’Donohue

Nearer to the earth’s heart,
Deeper within its silence:
Animals know this world
In a way we never will.

We who are ever
Distanced and distracted
By the parade of bright
Windows thought opens:

Their seamless presence
Is not fractured thus.

Stranded between time
Gone and time emerging,
We manage seldom
To be where we are:
Whereas they are always
Looking out from
The here and now.

May we learn to return
And rest in the beauty
Of animal being,
Learn to lean low,
Leave our locked minds,
And with freed senses
Feel the earth
Breathing with us.

May we enter
Into lightness of spirit,
And slip frequently into
The feel of the wild.

Let the clear silence
Of our animal being
Cleanse our hearts
Of corrosive words.

May we learn to walk
Upon the earth
With all their confidence
And clear-eyed stillness
So that our minds
Might be baptized
In the name of the wind
And the light and the rain.

HOW THEY BLESS US

The Old Woman Who Named Things a story by Cynthia Rylant (edited)

I want to tell you a story about a woman who named THINGS. She named her house Franklin. She named her car Betsy. She named her old chair Fred; and her bed Roxanne. It was a curious habit. The thing is she didn't name anything living ... because she had lived longer than many of her friends, and many of her pets ... and it made her sad. But one day, a small stray dog arrived at her home, and looked hungry. She tried to ignore it, but after a while she gave it a piece of ham, and told it to go home – she didn't want to lose anything else. But the dog kept coming back ... and started hanging out ... still she wouldn't give it a name. She went inside Franklin, and curled up in Fred, thinking about what a sweet dog it was. But when she lay down on Roxanne, she was determined not to give that puppy a name, even though it came to visit her for months. But then one day, it didn't come, and she got worried. She drove around in Betsy looking for it ... but no luck. She worried some more. And then finally she decided to go check the local shelter ... who else would know to take care of it? The shelter manager asked her what the dog's name was ... and it made her think of all the people and creatures that had been a part of her life ... how lucky she had been to know them. So she said, "his name is Lucky," and as soon as she said it, she heard his familiar bark. So he came home to live with her ... riding in Betsy, to get to Franklin, where he loved to sit in Fred, and sleep next to her on Roxanne. Lucky dog.

NAMING THOSE WE HAVE LOVED

It's hard to lose animals that we have loved.

In our house we had a dog named Molly, and a rat named Yoshe; we had a frog named Herman, and a bunny named Sleepy; we had too many fish to remember. We are grateful to them all.

I invite you to name the creatures you have loved who are no longer with us the same way. In gratitude, we remember all the creatures from whom we have learned patience, acceptance, and bountiful love.

HOW WE BLESS THEM

And now we turn to those who are among us still – always willing, seeking and teaching. We are blessed by their presence, and turn to bless them, as well, in gratitude for their gifts.

As you name your pets, we will share THESE WORDS together:

We thank you and bless you for the gift that you are.

HYMN 402 From you I receive, to you I give; together we share, and from this we live.

SERMON

All God's Critters

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

I want to begin with the wise words of Wendell Berry, who is a farmer, and poet, an observer of our social structure, a teacher, and a lover of all things in nature. Especially for this week of emotional challenge, I offer his poem, "The Peace of Wild Things":

When despair grows in me
and I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Resting in the grace of the world – sometimes that feels fairly elusive, doesn't it? Even FINDING the grace of the world can feel elusive.

I want to speak for a moment, given the week we have experienced, to those of you who have suffered abuse in your lives, for whom this time in particular may have been a reminder of our capacity to mistreat each other; for whom silence may have felt the only safe road; for whom support felt wanting; for whom resting in the grace of the world may have felt an inaccessible experience. The flip side of this dark coin of reality we are witnessing is the light that is being cast on an old and too-familiar experience. Putting the tensions of the present claims aside, we are being required – on the national stage – to recognize our capacity for particular human failings in the light of day, and that – with all its murky shadowy mess – can only be a good thing, despite the discomfort. May you be healed, in some way, by the exposed truth of YOUR story, as one of too many, and the united cry that what you have suffered is not OK.

I encourage all of you to reach out for assistance if you are struggling still.

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This service as a blessing from and for our creature kingdom – which to some may feel a bit lighthearted given our present challenges – is not an accident of timing, nor in all honesty something to be taken too lightly, after all. We have much to learn and do well to remember there are many teachers all around us. Many of you may be aware that the Feast of St. Francis is celebrated on October 4. St. Francis, who is known as the patron saint of animals, was a 13th century monk about whom stories abound. One tale suggests he was walking down a road with trees on either side, full of birds. Francis asked his companions to wait while he went to preach to his sisters and brothers the birds – all of whom listened patiently, intrigued by the sounds of his voice. Can you imagine? (There are trees FULL of birds in the morning near the Blodgett Pool where I go to swim – I doubt they would listen to me the same way!) St. Francis encourages us to remember our connection to all creation, how we are in relationship with each other, and to consider how to be good stewards not just among ourselves, but to all and every living thing. And we need his reminder.

I suspect times like these ARE important moments to step back – to reflect that as messy and complicated as our human lives can be, it is also important to think about our shared experience of life. We are imperfect and incomplete AND we are not on this earth alone.

Maybe that's why we have pets, after all – even Norman! They remind us that ours is not the only way to perceive the world, when so often we are held captive by our own needs and wants. And in our heightened sense of priority, caught up in either surviving or changing the world for ourselves, and even knowing those efforts are good and important, we forget the resource that the creature world offers – the wisdom of their unique experiences and ways of being.

I am reminded that when we go to new puppy classes, a good trainer will explain that WE are the ones actually being trained – have you had that experience?

If only we could hear with their ears, or see with their eyes, or smell with their noses – imagine the world that would open up to us! And even more the gift of perspective they share, that we might occasionally do well to mimic: the nature of wild things “who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.”

It is both blessing and curse to see forward, isn't it?

The creature kingdom doesn't worry about the future, as far as we know ... which means they don't anticipate bad things. Squirrels, for example, apparently collect nuts out of habit – not because they know winter is coming. (Don't quote me. I only did cursory research!)

So the question becomes, how are we doing – this planning for our future and theirs? And I think we know, we're coming up a bit short.

Research professor Brené Brown suggests we are presently experiencing a collective waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop, always waiting, which is making us loopy. I keep wondering ... how many shoes are there? Every time we hear the news, another one is dropping! It gets in the way, she maintains, of our capacity to experience joy, or if Berry is right, grace. We are too busy shielding ourselves against the next catastrophe.

But the truth is, it IS our responsibility to look forward, isn't it, whether we like what we imagine, or not. Unlike the squirrel, we do know winter is coming, among other things.

There's a kind of tension, of course, between imitating our creature friends by way of their gift for living in the present, and caring for them by attending to what's ahead.

Aoife invited us into their world earlier: Were you the cat in the window? Or the bearded dragon lizard content on his rock? Were you the dog by the fireside?

I was grateful that she didn't invite us to imagine being the cow whose shortened life becomes our meal, or the chicken in her cage, squeezed in with so many others that she can hardly stand. It is a hard truth to ask ourselves to imagine how we are caring for those creatures; how we have caused their lives to be used for our service.

It is a sad reality that All God's Critters actually don't have a place in the choir, at least not for very long, especially when we also know the impact of our choices is having an egregious impact on the very life of our planet.

This is our last Sunday with Vision as a theme, and I want to offer a vision of this congregation that chooses a more intentional path for its collective culinary life. I'm hoping we will consider using today's reminder of how we are blessed by and how we bless the creature world around us to make a commitment to sharing meals that do not include meat or fowl or fish on our plates. Does that feel too radical a vision? There are many of you who may observe this in your homes, already, but many – I'm sure – who don't.

But how is it we are holding ourselves accountable to the world around us – and the creatures we share this planet with, not to mention the earth itself – if we are not willing to make some hard choices?

If we imagine this community as a sanctuary of spirit, justice, and arts, shouldn't we be holding ourselves – in our life together, at least – to a standard that respects all creatures and the future that we are tasked with caring for?

I am asking us to represent an aspiration of care as a faith community that does not judge our individual choices but offers an alternative way of being. And it could be a learning choice for us, inviting – for example – people who know more about the range that is available to us, and others who have already made their choices, to teach us how to cook and eat differently.

The present is never perfect. Our task as a faith community is to acknowledge the growing edges, and seek – together – a better way because we CAN look forward, and we must. On behalf of all those who roam this world differently than we do, let us be willing to make choices that will honor us all.

So may it be.