

Blessing of the Animals: A Sermon and Service for the Commemoration of St. Francis

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In many ways, the Blessing of the Animals service stands on the margins of the church's life. Few people, I image, would rank it in the "top ten" important church services; and many people, I know, have never attended one—and some people don't even know this service exists. And for others, I am sure the very idea of bringing animals into one's ecclesial life seems odd: What does the church have to do with animals, anyway? Many Christians, I think, view this service as an indulgence, an aside, an asterisk to the central mission and work of the church: it is the very definition of "marginal"—peripheral, negligible, fringe.

But actually, I would argue that it is often the things that we do on the margins that are most deeply reflective of who we are as a community and make the most powerful statement about what we value. What do you do, once you have the basics covered? What choices do you make when no one is watching—no candidacy committees, no grades, no evaluations?

When the center is secure, where do you go?

We have good company at the margins, of course: it is where Jesus spent most of his time and did some of his best work. Part of the larger picture of "reversal" that we see in the Gospel narratives about Jesus' ministry, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, is the shift of focus from the center to the edges, and an inversion of the place of importance. For Jesus, the "place to be" was not the trendiest restaurant, the hottest art exhibit, or the latest vacation locale; and the people to see weren't the bishops, the business leaders, or the politicians. Instead, Jesus hung out on the fringes of society—with the outcasts, the overlooked, and the undervalued. He took his stand and made his place with those deemed "non-essential" to the health and well-being of the community; and, in the end, he staked his life on their worth in the eyes of God.

So, when we here at Wartburg Theological Seminary have a Blessing of the Animals service, we, too, offer a public witness to society about what we value, and where we see our place.

By our presence here today we proclaim not only our love but **God's love** for all of God's creatures, for all of God's creation. Today we take **our stand** with those creatures who too often are undervalued, abused, and neglected. Today, as the body of Christ, we move from the center to the margins—or better, we move the margins **to** the center, practicing a little Christ-like "reversal" of our own,



In Christ, ...we are called to a "both/and" life, a life that is rich enough, broad enough, and deep enough to support the flourishing of the whole creation, all of us together.

This Blessing of the Animals service proclaims that when it comes to faithful service and discipleship, it's not about choosing humans **or** animals, and it's certainly not about sacrificing the margins for the sake of the center. The fact is, that, in Christ, we're not called to an "either/or" life, we are called to a "both/and" life, a life that is rich enough, broad enough, and deep enough to support the flourishing of the whole creation, all of us together.

We do not *have* to do a Blessing of the Animals service—not every seminary does—but I'm so glad that we do, because it not only reminds us of God's love and care for the whole wide world, but it also reminds us that what we do on the margins has the power to transform the center, testifying to the vision of the Kingdom of God we have been shown in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ; a vision of harmony, peace and justice for all, a vision where there are no margins at all, only a big fat center where everyone is welcome—two feet, four feet, no feet; wings, fins, and flippers. Amen.

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Blessing of the Animals: Commemoration of St. Francis



Leader: The Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray.

Loving God of all creation, thank you that you have fashioned with such care and love this beautiful, complex web of life. By your gracious will, we humans share a home with sharks and trees, crows and moss, coral and chipmunks. Today we especially give you thanks for the animal companions who are part of our families, whom you have given us to care for and love. Help us to provide for them and promote their flourishing, as their companionship promotes ours. In our love for them, we share in your love for all creation. We ask this in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Confession

Let us confess our sins to God, returning to the One whose care for God's whole creation never wavers, whose love for all God's creatures animates our own:

**God of the leviathan and the lion, Creator of the serpent and the jackal,
We confess to you that we have not tended your creation well,
and we have misused the responsibility you have given us.
We have failed to respond in awe to the wonders of your creation;
We have misinterpreted our role of dominion and abused our power.
We have polluted and destroyed environments, caused the extinction of countless animals,
and have not lived in right relationship with our animal siblings.
Forgive us as we seek anew the vision of a peaceable kingdom, which you set before us,
Renew and restore us for faithful service to your creation,
Inspire us for lives of Christian discipleship.
Through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.**

Absolution

Almighty God grant us forgiveness of our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ and the strength and grace to respond with love to all God's creation. Amen.

Prayer of St. Francis *(said in unison)*

**Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light; and
where there is sadness, joy.
O, God, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.**

Reading

The Creation Story [Genesis 1:1-34, abbreviated]

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and a great dimness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

On the first day, God created light and darkness.

On the second day, God created the sky above and the waters below.

On the third day, God formed the land and called it Earth, and gathered the water and called it Sea. God blessed the earth with vegetation and food.

On the fourth day, God separated the day from the night, creating the sun, the moon, and the stars.

On the fifth day, God brought forth swarms of living creatures in the air, in the water, and on the land, and God bid them to be fruitful and multiply.

On the sixth day, God created humankind in God's image, giving them dominion over the animals. God blessed them and bid them to be fruitful and multiply.

On the seventh day, God saw that everything that God had made was very good and God rested and blessed the seventh day and made it sacred.

Homily

Hymn

"All Creatures Worship God Most High"

Evangelical Lutheran Worship #835

Blessing of the Animals

Each animal receives an individual blessing.

Prayers

Closing Prayer:

Almighty God, you are the Alpha and Omega, creation's beginning and its culmination. We give you thanks for animating our lives with joy, and surrounding us with your tender care. We thank you for these animals with us today, and those we hold in our hearts and remember with love. Inspire us to live with courage and compassion, as we seek to promote their well-being, and the well-being of all animals, ecosystems, and natural habitats near and far. Help us to be a voice for the voiceless, and an advocate for the exploited and marginalized. And in all things, may we be bearers of your great love. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen**

Blessing and Dismissal