

Angels I Have Known

October 6, 2019

Good morning!

Today we celebrate the legacy of St. Francis. We've probably all heard stories about him – making you believe he was, perhaps, a little crazy – but he was a good man and loved to share the Good News of the Gospel.

One story tells of an encounter with a flock of birds – doves, crows – all sorts of birds. When St. Francis spotted them down the road, he ran toward them and expected them to scatter but to his surprise – and probably anyone else's who may have witnessed this – the birds stood still and seemed to wait for him. He was filled with awe and he asked them to stay and then proceeded to give them a little sermon, reminding them that they should always praise their Creator for he was the one who gave them feathers for clothes, wings to fly, and anything else that was needed. “It is God who made you noble among all creatures, making your home in thin, pure air. Without sowing or reaping, you received God's guidance and protection.” And so the story goes that from that day on, Francis made it his habit to invoke all animals to praise and love their Creator.

But wait a minute, Francis. While all of what you told those birds was certainly true - if I may say so – you missed the bigger picture! I believe that animals have a lot to tell us, to teach us, and to remind us of. They are messengers and, I believe, vessels enabling 2-way communication with God. So, Francis, perhaps spending some time *listening* to them would have done you some good, too.

There are all sorts of stories today that you read and see in the news about comfort animals – not only dogs or cats that we have (air quotes) domesticated – but lizards and potbelly pigs. Heck, there is even a chicken coop at Cook Country Jail built and taken care of by inmates. Power to the chicken!

I have had several kinds of pets in my life – cats, a couple of turtles, even a parakeet - but my comfort drug of choice is a dog. Dogs can comfort war torn veterans with PTSD or can help rehabilitate incarcerated persons. There are bomb-sniffing dogs and cancer-sniffing dogs and drug-sniffing dogs. There are non-judgmental dogs that let children read to them to help improve their reading skills. Dogs can be trained to detect changes in glucose levels in

people with diabetes and detect the onset of a seizure in someone with epilepsy. My experiences have not been as dramatic as those. It's more about what I have learned – or rather what I was taught – that makes these animals so important to me...

When I was about 8 years old, I was diagnosed with a kidney condition which required me to have total bed rest – no school, no going outside, and no hot dogs or pizza! (I was on a low sodium diet.) Just me, my bed, and a TV. And then came Teddy, my comforter, my companion, my first dog. Since both of my parents worked, he kept me company while I recovered. And, because there were 3 girls in the family, Teddy also became my dad's only son. It was sort of a family joke, but apparently Teddy took the role quite seriously. And on one cold winter night, while my dad was walking him, my dad slipped on some ice, fell, and broke several ribs. Teddy didn't run off. He stayed there with him until my dad was somehow able to get up and painfully make his way back home. So all the while I thought he was there just for me, God maybe had another purpose in mind.

Many years later, after Teddy, after Puffy, Buddy, Boots, Bo, and Brownie, there was Sheba. It was April 1, 2004. It was after my husband, Frank, was diagnosed and undergoing treatment for lung cancer. Sheba came with a back story that can make me cry. She was rescued from people who 'wanted to take her babies and fight them' we were told later by the man who basically laid her on our doorstep. Litter after litter with no medical attention left her with a condition called pyometra, which was on track to kill her until our vet successfully intervened. She would have no more babies but *her* life was spared. Those physical scars she endured could not, however, scar Sheba's soul.

This beautiful, skinny Rottweiler quickly became Frank's girlfriend. I was only the wife. Toward the end of his ravaging treatments, when he could barely speak and had very little stamina left, Frank still walked her, rain or shine, hot or cold. And when his disease finally took him, me and Sheba were left to mourn together. I don't understand how silence can be so comforting but it was now on her walks with me, where she let me cry and silently strode along, that helped me through my grief. When she let me bury my head in her massive chest, without saying a word, it made me feel better. And I know she was grieving, too.

So, my first reaction to *her* cancer diagnosis a few years later was “not funny, God.” I was determined to save her, if at all possible, trying every conceivable treatment as long as she was still thriving, still eating, because Sheba lived to eat. And when I realized I had done all that I possibly could, and it was time to say goodbye, I took all the time that I could, laying on the floor next to her, talking to her, telling her how much I loved her, things I didn’t do with Frank because I was so much in denial, I actually thought he was going to recover and come home from hospice. That guilt and that denial were haunting me, telling me I didn’t do enough, that cancer shouldn’t have won. But God gave me the chance to heal those wounds by opening them all up again, cutting away the dead spots like a surgeon, giving me a fresh perspective. He gave me Sheba so that I could heal.

On a cold November night almost 2 years ago, Joaquin found a puppy in the alley, struggling to ambulate, sort of ‘swimming’ able only to use his front paws. Joaquin named him Oreo before he got home. It was love at first sight. We were probably the last people who should have found him that night, though. We were in such financial straits that we could barely keep the lights on or feed ourselves, much less feed another animal in addition to Rex, Tippy, and many chickens. On top of that, Oreo had obvious medical problems and vets are expensive. Through a generous gift from you, this congregation, we learned eventually that Oreo’s problem was most likely neurologic and that his gait would never be normal.

But Oreo doesn’t care. As he got older, the strength in his front legs grew exponentially and he is able to walk, albeit with a crazy sort of dancing motion when his one ‘bad’ leg flails in the air, sometimes causing him to fall. But he always gets back up somehow and can run and jump with the best of them now, the poster dog for perseverance. What little we managed to give him, he paid us back 1,000 times 1,000 with laughter, smiles, joy, and love, unconditional love– the things we *really* needed that got us through that rough time. Things money can’t buy.

Oreo visits me several times a day as I am typing away in my office at home. He puts his head in my lap and looks at me with those beautiful, trusting brown eyes and waits until I take the time to stroke his head, feel the exquisite softness of his ears, smell his doggy smells, and kiss his head. And I think, these are God’s eyes looking at me –showing me how and how much I am loved by our Creator – with no conditions attached. So I take his little head in my hands and look straight in his eyes and say “I love you, too,” because I

think we not only need to be reminded of how God loves us, but we also need to be reminded to tell him that we love Him -way more than once a week – and what a better reminder than this loving creature, whose name spelled backwards is God.

Sometimes I wonder why God made me so crazy, as this affinity for animals tugs at my heart so fiercely that every time those commercials for the Humane Society come on TV, I have to mute the volume and turn my head away, lest I spend the rest of the afternoon sobbing. It drives me to make a chicken salad FOR my chickens every day. And it drove me to run up a credit card with well over \$10,000 in charges just so Sheba and I could spend more time together. Maybe I will never know the answer to that mystery. Or maybe I do have more in common with St. Francis than I think. But what I do know is that the angels who speak to me do not have gossamer wings – well, some of them do have wings, very soft wings, in fact. (If you have never held a chicken, I recommend it highly.) My angels have wet noses, deep soulful eyes, and frequently muddy paws. They have been sent by God to me (and all of us) as a gift of comfort, of course, but also to serve as a constant example of how God loves us and how we should love Him.

Can I get an Amen?