

Don't Worry, Be Blessed

B Animal Blessing

Okay we're going to start today's sermon off with a little 80's musical-trivia pop-quiz name-that-tune kind of thing, because there's a Bobby McFerrin song from 1988 whose chorus captures the essence of today's gospel reading. Those of you who remember the eighties, or studied them in school, just shout out the lyrics at the appropriate point. (*Whistles "Don't Worry, Be Happy."*)

Very good. Don't worry, be happy: that's pretty much Jesus' advice in Matthew 6 right there. Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or wear. Be happy: God provides for these things. And for an example, Jesus points to God's creation in the natural world. Look at birds and lilies. They don't worry. They just live their lives, and God feeds and clothes them with everything they need. So be like them. Appreciate the blessed gift of life right here and right now, and let God take care of tomorrow. Don't worry, be happy.

Only maybe "happy" isn't quite the right word. Maybe "happy" is a bit too shallow for what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about something deeper and more appreciative than mere happiness, more of a heartfelt response to the incredible abundance of God's world. Don't worry, be joyful, gets closer to it. Or maybe, Don't worry, be blessed, as in, experience how blessed you are.

Don't worry, be blessed. And to help us get in touch with that blessedness, our responsive reading from Genesis points to the beauty and wonder of creation. God created the world and everything in it, Genesis asserts. And God saw that it was good.

In fact, St. Francis, whom we commemorate today, was deeply in touch with the beauty of God's creation and deeply aware of his dependence on God for everything. I mean, here was a man who gave up a lifestyle of riches and some really serious partying, and literally wandered around in the woods, sleeping out-of-doors, finding food where he could, talking to animals and birds, embracing lepers, and existing in this state of spiritual bliss. Despite poverty, despite exposure to the elements, despite the tenuousness of life, Francis didn't worry. He was joyful. He was blessed, and he knew it.

Now the danger of an event like today's, is that it could lose its connection to that sense of blessing. You know, we hold this kitschy service and everyone brings their pets and we have pet-treats at coffee hour, and it's all a lot of fun. But the whole thing could become the liturgical equivalent of turning Francis into a cute lawn ornament, you know? It could fail to engage what Francis pointed to so radically: how deeply blessed we are by the natural world, into the fabric of which our lives are woven.

Because the truth is that when we invoke blessings on things, when we name our fellow creatures as blessed by God and as blessings from God in our lives, we are playing with powerful stuff. We are touching on some core relationships we have with the rest of creation.

I was reminded of this on a Sunday afternoon the week before last year's Animal Blessing. This particular day I happened to be at the church still, when this guy I'd never seen before came in through the front door. He was tallish, as I recall, around forty with straight sandy hair and a sad, nervous look. I asked if I could help him. He said that he'd seen our sign advertising the animal blessing for the following Sunday, but he had two

dogs in the back of his car that he didn't think would make it that long. Would I bless them now?

So he led me out to his car and opened the back. There they were, an old, gray husky and a yellow lab, lying on their sides, just breathing. They didn't even lift their heads to look at us. The guy explained that they were eleven and thirteen and had gotten ill with different things at the same time. There was a quaver in his voice as he spoke. He told me they'd both been therapy dogs that he'd taken into convalescent homes and hospitals. They'd brought joy to a lot of people. I said, "It's like they were your kids." He said, "They are my kids. They are my kids." And he explained that when he'd gotten divorced a few years ago he had told his wife she could have everything, but he wanted the dogs.

So I reached in through the hatchback and put my hand on the husky. I felt the warm balloon of its stomach rising and falling, and I held the man's hand in my other hand, and I blessed that dog, thanking God for its life and asking God for special care in its final days. Then I blessed the yellow lab, too. It was one of the most powerful moments in my ministry. After the blessing was over, the man thanked me and insisted on making a donation to the church, and then he drove out of the parking lot, and I haven't seen him since.

Now I'm pretty sure that man was not a church-goer. Yet somehow our sign's promise of blessing, our sign's promise of a holy naming of the significance of his dogs' lives, moved him to come into this strange church building a week early in an off-hour because he was so hungry for such an experience. And in this way, he taught me about the power of blessing. You think you are holding a fun, light-hearted event and then

someone like that comes along to remind you how much it means. And while I wouldn't call that moment happy, I think it is fair to say that it carried its own strain of joy. It carried deep gratitude, a true sense of blessedness. And maybe it even helped that man not to worry, as we blessed his two, faithful companions whose lives were even then being sucked gently back into the holy, mysterious breath of God.