

Is. 11:6-9      Ps. 104      Ro. 8:18-23      Mt. 11:25-30

If you look up the phrase “creature comforts” it generally refers to things that enhance or contribute to one’s physical well-being: food, clothing, furnishings, housing. The example given on dictionary.com uses this sentence: “Dean always stayed in the best hotels, he valued his creature comforts.”

But we who are here to celebrate the Feast of St. Francis, and to honor our animal companions, in fact all creatures, and beyond that all of creation, might say that dictionary.com has missed the mark, which by the way is one way sin is defined as noted by theologian Mark Biddle.

I’m confident that animal lovers will concur, that it would be more accurate to say, our creatures bring us comfort. And to take it a step further relative to holy writ that it is incumbent upon us to bring our creatures comfort!

And... our intermutual relationality with animals and nature is a window and opportunity to glean divine wisdom. For as hymnist Brian Wren has offered: There are two books of revelation, the Bible and Creation.

I’d also challenge dictionary.com that food and housing is not an enhancement but is essential to basic human need. We are creatures. One among many of God’s creatures. We are no better nor necessarily wiser than any others; just because we might have bigger brains. Who can measure the intelligence of creatures whose language we do not speak nor understand? Maybe it’s time we tried? Maybe it’s time to learn from the wisdom of God revealed all around us? From those that dwell with us, providing us comfort especially during periods of isolation and pandemic? What can we glean from the behavior of those whom love us unconditionally and yet depend upon our care and respect? What does creature comfort mean to our animal friends?

12th century St. Francis of Assisi, set out to learn this. He renounced his family wealth and inheritance, seeking to find the divine not through worldly conceptions and “creature comforts” but through service in comforting creatures, both human and non-human. He discovered that his family extended beyond traditional blood lines, beyond gender, beyond race and nationality reaching out all the way to brother Sun, Sister Moon, Wind and Water.

We are blessed with the cognizance to understand this blessing and interconnectedness of all of God’s living grandeur in creation. We have the capacity to embrace this blessing and wisdom. We have the call to serve as stewards of creation, since our first steps in the original garden.

19th Century renowned Swiss theologian Karl Barth interprets ‘blessing’ as “authorization to be” grounded in “the great primordial blessings uttered by God in the first story of creation. (Gen. 1:22,28)” (Andrew Linzey, *Animal Rites*, 1999, p.101)

In his remarkable resource, *Animal Rites – Liturgies of Animal Care*, Anglican priest and theologian Andrew Linzey draws upon Barth's work rightly suggesting, "thus the act of blessing is inseparable from the divine grant of land, living space, indeed life itself." (*Forms for the Blessing of Animals*, ch. 8, p.101) We cannot deny that creature comforts applies to all creatures.

When we bless animals, we affirm their right to be... themselves, to be free and we align ourselves with God's desires and values for all God's creatures. We in turn are blessed by animals, particularly those with whom we mutually share affection and companionship. This essentially reflects Trinitarian and Incarnational doctrines which are both about mutuality in relationship between God and creation.

If God is so keen on relationship, to say an animal is our friend, even beloved, is to then say Yes! to God's desires for us. Lindsey adds that "People who keep animals have often made an elementary but profound discovery... [that they too] are beings with their own God-given life (nephesh), [with their own] individuality and personality. At their best, relations with companion animals can help us to grow in mutuality, self-giving, and trust... even offering clues to us of the divine, self-giving nature of God.

All living beings are precious to God. Indeed, all creation matters as our habitat and abode. Literally and Spiritually speaking!

What can we learn from our feathered, furred, finned friends? How do they minister to us? And they do, even to the Lord of all creatures; for even Jesus was ministered to in the wilderness by animals and angels. Perhaps one in the same? With messages to convey to us?

I want to conclude with an excerpt from *The Wilderness World of John Muir*. There were so, so many great thoughts that I came across in this selection of his collected work. If I could, I'd share the whole book with you! His deepening admiration of God's creation and love for God's creatures is moving.

In the period called "University of the Wilderness" his encounter of feathered, furred, finned, and other creatures is a virtual channeling of St. Francis, as he learns from them and comes to regard them as friends. In "The Bear, the Fly and the Grasshopper", he describes quite comically his meeting of Brother Bruin Bear who doesn't appear to be quite intimidated by "bad brother man" as he'd heard one might be. Then he's stopped short by a "conservatory of Nature's precious plant people: Tall lilies swinging their bells over the bear's back, with geraniums, larkspurs, columbines and daisies brushing against bear's sides. A place for angels, [he suggests] instead of bears... I should like to know my hairy brothers better" [he says] but all the same he was glad that this particular Yosemite bear had sauntered off.

After this he was quite amused by a house fly that had somehow found him as he "sat sketching, enjoying [the] bear interview now that it was over!" But when the grasshopper put on quite a dance, he felt "a braver, heartier creature, great or small, [he'd] never seen... A fine sermon the little fellow danced for me on the Dome, a likely place to look for sermons in stones, but not for grasshopper sermons. A large and imposing pulpit for so small a preacher.

No danger of weakness in the knees of the world while Nature can spring such a rattle as this. Even the bear did not express for me the mountain's wild health and strength and happiness so tellingly as did this comical little hopper. No cloud of care in his day, no winter of discontent in sight. To him every day is a holiday; and when at length his sun sets, I fancy he will cuddle down on the forest floor and die like the leaves and flowers, and like them leave no unsightly remains calling for burial. Sundown, and I must to camp.

Goodnight, friends three – brown bear, rugged boulder of energy in groves and gardens fair as Eden; restless fussy fly with gauzy wings stirring the air around all the world; and grasshopper, crisp electric spark of joy enlivening the massy sublimity of the mountains like the laugh of a child. Thank you, thank you all three for your quickening company. Heaven guide every wing and leg. Goodnight, friends three, goodnight.”

Amen!

Amma Susan+