

Today is the day that we celebrate the blessing of the animals in honor of St. Francis. But really, based on our readings today we are celebrating all of God's creation and our place in it.

Our psalm sets the context when the psalmist wonders "What is man that you should be mindful of him, the son of man that you seek him out? You have made him but little lower than the angels; you adorn him with glory and honor; You give him mastery over the works of your hands; you put all things under his feet."

Wow! Do those verses pop or what? These are good questions. Why did God make us and why did God put us at the center of creation? This is the macro level people. We are a part of the glories of creation. If we take it down to a personal level it becomes too easy to focus on what doesn't work, beginning with how much it hurts to get out of bed in the morning. But like that moment when we look at the marvels of a baby's hands and feet, the translucency of their skin, that amazing dependence that they have on us for their very existence well then yes we can marvel at the grace of our place in the universe, the amazing glory of what it is to behold the essence of our life as human beings.

Human beings are "but little lower than the angels." God gave us "memory, reason, and skill," and above all God gave us the capacity to love, to love life, the very act of being alive, to love God and each other, and to love what God has given us in creation. We might not be able to fly around like the angels, or attend God in God's heavenly court yet, but we right now we know the joys of our earthly existence: food and fellowship, the warmth of a fire, or central heating which is far more reliable, the feel of the sun on our face, provided we are wearing sunscreen, the smell of the rain, the taste of a snowflake. Before this turns into a Hallmark card, just think about all of the things that bring you joy.

We see this in our reading from Genesis. God has finished creation and then looks at the man and decides that it is not good for him to be alone. How sweet is that? God, being on a creative streak, starts forming animals of the field and birds of the air. However comforting our furry and feathered friends may be they are no substitute for human companionship. But God is no assembly line. Adam, the animals and birds are made out of the earth and when God realized that the animals and birds weren't what the man was looking for God didn't fashion the man's intended partner out of the earth. Instead God made the man's partner out of the man himself. Shades of Jerry Maguire when he says to his girlfriend "You complete me." The commentaries are clear that this is not a reflection of dependence or subservience but of equality and mutuality.

God's intention for the man and for the woman, for human kind, is that the relationship was to provide mutual support and comfort... which is what Jesus is getting at when he talks about marriage in our gospel lesson.

Moreover God gave us dominion over creation, not for domination or exploitation but for stewardship, we are God's representatives on earth and we are also to participate with God in co-creation. Music, art, architecture, poetry, and literature, are all expressions of our capacity to enter into the fullness that God intended for us in life but so is our exploration of

space, the blessings of modern medicine, athletic pursuits that push the boundaries of our capabilities, our expansion of what it means to be human... and then there's what we do with it.

Jesus is reflecting on this when he talks about divorce. Divorce is a sign that God's intentions for humankind are not necessarily fulfilled by humankind. No surprise. Our willfulness has caused us to abuse the freedom that God has given us. As far back as Moses, some 3,500 years ago, people were getting divorced. Jesus saw that the impact of divorce fell most heavily on women because divorce was as much an exchange of property as it was a matter of relationship in clear violation of the purposes of marriage. Marriage became about creating alliances – look at Solomon and David and all their wives, or even in Jesus' time Herod and Herodias. It was complaining about that bizarre marriage that got John the Baptist beheaded. Spouses were discarded when they became inconvenient and most often for women it left them without financial resources or social support. And even today when people divorce it is not a painless affair, even when it is uncontested. Therefore in the kingdom of God, marriage creates an inseparable bond where divorce is unthinkable.

We live with the tension created by our propensity for sin, just as we live in the tension of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God which is here but not yet fulfilled. We are broken. We reach for the stars and create weapons of mass destruction, we worship God and we pursue Holy War, we have forgotten that dying is an important part of living; we disobey God's commandments to care for the poor and the vulnerable whether through indifference or downright cruelty. We don't respect creation, pollution, animal abuse, rerouting rivers, clearcutting forests, strip-mining the earth. If there is a way to torture this earth we have found it and unfortunately we do the same to the animals that are supposed to be under our care and even the people who are subject to our control.

The second half of our gospel lesson is about children. As I said a couple of weeks ago children were not valued in the ancient world. Apparently Jesus disciples didn't appreciate them either because they shooed away those who were bringing their children to Jesus. Jesus rebukes them and gathers the children to him, reminding the disciples that in the kingdom of God, those who are most vulnerable, those who are most fragile are precious in God's eyes. So too are the birds of the air the creatures that walk the earth and the fish that swim in the sea.

But God has seen how destructive we can be. And instead of punishing us as much as we deserve, and given the fact that most of the time we seem to do a very good job of punishing ourselves, God sent us his only son, who according to the letter to the Hebrews "made purification for sins," purification that came through Christ's willingness to suffer unto death on our behalf so that we too might be sanctified, made holy. It is love, God's love for us that made this possible and God's willingness to offer himself up in love for the healing of all creation.

This love is the same love that brought forth creation in the first place and that continues to sustain us in the form of God's Holy Spirit. This love is so big it is hard to grasp but perhaps on this day when we bless our animals, those creatures God has consigned to our care, we might appreciate a little of what God feels for creation. We love our creatures even when they make us nuts. We care for our creatures and they return our love, admittedly some more so than others, and so it is with us human beings. The value comes in reciprocity of the

relationship, a response to the love and care and protection that we show to them and that God has shown to us. And no I am not saying that we are the equivalent of God's pets! Nevertheless the love that we bear for those creatures in our care expands our capacity for love and that is always a good thing.

Let us pray:

In your infinite wisdom, Lord God, you blessed us with dominion over all living creatures. We thank you for giving us our pets who are our friends and who bring us so much joy in life, and whose dependence teaches us to care for those who are vulnerable. Bless our pets, keep us attentive to their needs as you are attentive to ours. In the name of the one who has redeemed us all.

Amen