

The Feast of St. Francis – The Blessing of the Animals    October 4, 2009

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -- I keep it, staying at Home --  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister -- And an Orchard, for a Dome --  
    Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice -- I just wear my Wings --  
    And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church, Our little Sexton -- sings.  
God preaches, a noted Clergyman -- And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -- I'm going, all along.

*(Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church ~ Emily Dickinson)*

On this day that we remember St. Francis, the dualistic divide between the spiritual realm and the natural world that western Christianity has so often perpetuated, becomes a bit more blurred. As churches open their doors to dogs, cats, guinea pigs, and all sorts of creatures, the choice that Emily Dickinson had to make between going to church and experiencing God in the song of a bobolink is not so difficult. Thankfully, we are finally beginning to understand the awesome interconnectedness of the great web of life in which we exist along with all the rest of creation. So when we hear Jesus say “Look at the birds of the air” and “Consider the lilies of the field,” we realize that we are not only caretakers of creation, we also benefit from the wisdom it teaches us.

So today, Jesus might instead have said “Look at the furbish lousewort” or “Consider the snail darter.” “What,” you ask, “is a snail darter?” The snail darter is a small fish native to waters of East Tennessee. They grow to only about three inches long (see pix below), but this tiny fish was at the center of a huge controversy back in the 70s involving the construction of a dam on the Little Tennessee River. Opponents claimed that the reservoir created by the dam would change the habitat of the river to the point of wiping out the entire population of snail darters. The Tennessee Valley Authority and others in favor of the dam, as well as the media, couldn't believe that a multimillion dollar construction project could be held up by a fish. After lawsuits and counter lawsuits, the dam was eventually built and snail darters were moved to other waters where they have thrived well enough to be upgraded from “endangered” to “threatened” - end of story, although you can still find disagreements about how it all went down. But the importance of the story is that this was one of the first test cases of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, which provides for the conservation of endangered or threatened species - and the ecosystems on which they depend. So the snail darter could be a poster child (poster fish?) for environmental awareness.

As could the furbish lousewort - a perennial herb found only on the shores of the upper St. John's River in Maine and adjoining New Brunswick, Canada. This time, a \$227 million hydroelectric project was defeated because it would have severely reduced the lousewort's habitat. You can imagine the criticism. *Time* magazine called the idea "downright silly". But the lowly furbish lousewort actually has been called the poster-child for conservation biology.

I happen to know all this because I had a friend back then who worked for the National Park Service, and snail darters and louseworts were very big deals. As, with the Endangered Species Act, we all began to become familiar with words like ecosystems, conservation biology, and how climate, landscape, animals and plants all interact with one another – and with us. I even used to have a “Save the Lousewort” tee shirt, and I wish I could have found it to bring it for the Blessing of the Animals today.

Because, even as we bring our beloved pets and our cuddly stuffed animals and remember the needs of dogs, cats, guinea pigs, and all the cute creatures, we also need to lift up the needs of all the critters – even the ones we maybe don't like, or are afraid of, or seem too insignificant for our attention.

Like mosquitoes. Last week, the public radio show *To the Best of Our Knowledge* had a segment featuring Gates of the Arctic National Park in Alaska. Part of the interview was about mosquitoes. Naturalist Richard Nelson, described standing with 100 mosquitoes on one leg and 150 on the other, and the loud hum of mosquitoes as “the anthem of sleepless nights,” “the mantra of pure misery,” “the theme song of exasperation” and told how it is possible to stand in the middle of a swarm of these beasts and be dead in 3 hours from blood loss. But – he said – we also have to remember that songbirds from all over continent, from South America, and Africa go to northern Alaska in the summertime - for the mosquitoes. The amount of protein they supply is enough to feed them all. Like folk singer Bill Staines sang, “All God's critters got a place in the choir.”

In other words, we're all part of the ecosystem, the web of life, the Creation. Nelson said it this way: “We understand at a very deep level that our body is made out of the world around us.” And oftentimes, especially in our urban world, we see nature at a distance, behind a fence, on a screen – and we don't understand that what we're looking at is something we are literally a part of.

So, as we bring our pets to be blessed today – we give thanks to God for the gift of their lives, their love, their presence with us. But may we also renew our commitment to all the animals, all the fish, all the reptiles, all the fauna – and the flora (can't forget the lousewort) – and learn from them the wisdom of the web of life. Amen

#### *A Blessing of the Animals*

Blessed are you, Lord God, maker of all living creatures. On the fifth and sixth days of creation, you called forth fish in the sea, birds in the air and animals on the land. You inspired St. Francis to call all of them his brothers and sisters. We ask you to bless the animals and all living creatures. By the power of your love, enable them to live according to your plan. May we always praise you for all your beauty in creation. Blessed are you, Living God, in all your creatures! Amen

