

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

ASK THE ANIMALS, AND THEY WILL TEACH YOU

A sermon preached the 2nd of October 2016, The Solemnity of St Francis of Assisi / The Blessing of the Animals, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Job 12: 7 – 10.

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?
In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

— Job 12: 7 – 10

As a boy, I lumberjacked the Ottawa National Forest of Michigan's Upper Peninsula with my grandpa Jack, my father, my uncle Rod, my cousin Chubby, and a beautiful, intelligent draft horse named Jim. We drove into the woods before sunup, worked in the cool of the early morning half-light, and when we got tuckered out we took a break. I dipped an aluminum bucket in the creek and held it on a stump for Jim to slake his thirst. He ate crabapples from the palms of my hands. I was loved by Jim. I could see that in his chestnut eyes. And I loved him. He taught me the meaning of my name. Phillip. *Lover of horses.*

I want to tell you about a golden retriever as well. She was a four-week old puppy when our four children picked her out of a litter in Maryland seventeen years ago. We came home that day, and at the dinner table the kids talked of what they would name her. "You can name her whatever you want," I said, "but if you don't mind I would like to give her a middle name." "Okay, dad. What's her middle name?" "Hotspur," I said. They looked at me the way some of you are looking at me now. "Hotspur? What kind of a name is that?" It's from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. A braggart named Glendower, full of himself, boasts, "I can call spirits from the vasty deep." And Hotspur replies, "Why so can I. Or so can any man. But will they come when you do call for them?"

Maddie came when we called for her. She was a miracle in our lives. Many of you know what I'm talking about. All of us who have loved an animal have witnessed the same the miracle. That so many witness it doesn't make it any less wonderous. She showed us what shouldn't be possible: that we can have love an animal

and be loved by one. That we can have a friend, a member of the family, who is so utterly different from us.

It shouldn't be possible that we can be intimate with creatures so different from us. Maddie was not like our other friends. She fetched tennis balls for sport. Gabriel ran around the house with a treat in his hand just to see how many times she would chase him. Through the living room into the front entry down the hall through the dining room and back into the living room, she did that circuit eighty-eight times before she quit. She didn't laugh at our jokes. On the floor beside the dinner table, she didn't blush when she broke wind.

We experienced a miracle in the Ellsworth family because Maddie taught us something about God's love, something our other friends or family couldn't quite. Real love does not depend upon similarity. You don't have to be like someone to love them.

Love can cross the boundary between species and unite beings fundamentally different from the other: a horse and his boy, a dog and a family, a cat and a girl. This is an icon of the great love which connects us with the Most High. God is even more different from us than the animals are — "wholly other" as Karl Barth said.

If God is so far different from us, how can we say God is *close* to us? How can there be intimacy across the barrier that divides creatures from the Creator? Saint Augustine said, "God is closer to me than I am to myself." *How can that possibly be true?* Those of us who've loved a creature would borrow a line from Job to say, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.