

Sermon, October 5, 2025
The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi"
"Do Not Doubt What You See"
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine
Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

Blessing for each individual pet:

May God your creator and preserver bless, defend, heal, and keep you, this day and always. Amen.

Luke 17:5-6: The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

Sometimes gospels are long with many verses. Today we have two. Why? Because our pets have short attention spans? Perhaps? But perhaps that is all we and they need. How to increase our faith? We take our cue from the Book of Job: "Look to the animals and they will teach you. Who better to help us see and understand what animals can teach us? Our animals here with us as well as our saint of the day, Francis of Assisi.

One while walking with his companions, Francis spotted a great number of birds of all varieties. There were doves, crows and all sorts of birds. Swept up in the moment, Francis left his friends in the road and ran after the birds, who patiently waited for him.

He greeted them in his usual way, expecting them to scurry off into the air as he spoke. But they did not move. Filled with awe, he asked them if they would stay awhile and listen to the Word of God. He said to them: "My brother and sister birds, you should praise your Creator and always love him: He gave you feathers for clothes, wings to fly and all other things that you need. It is God who made you noble among all creatures, making your home in thin, pure air. Without sowing or reaping, you receive God's guidance and protection."

At this, the birds began to spread their wings, stretch their necks and gaze at Francis, rejoicing and praising God in a wonderful way according to their nature. Francis then walked right through the middle of them, turned around and came back, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic.

It has been said that the brothers who journeyed with him stood in amazement. Then he gave them his blessing, making the sign of the cross over them. At that they flew off and Francis, rejoicing and giving thanks to God, went on his way.

Later, Francis wondered aloud to his companions why he had never preached to birds before. And from that day on, Francis made it his habit to solicitously invoke all birds, all animals and reptiles to praise and love their Creator.

Like the birds and Francis, think about our pets and how much they are tuned into us. They watch us, tuned in to our every move – always hoping its time to be fed, or to go for a walk, or to play, depending on their mood. They are tremendous examples to us of faith and hope. Just because we have never before gone to the fridge and taken out a large steak or a fresh fish and thrown it on the grill for them before, doesn't mean we're not going to do it right this very minute.

And us? Do we wish for more faith and hope? Now more than ever? If we said to Jesus like the apostles, "Increase our faith", what would be the reply. Perhaps you try too hard, perhaps we need to be like our animal friends and look to what lies in front of us and see it, really see it.

In her book "For the Time Being", Annie Dillard writes, *"We live in all we seek. The hidden shows up in too-plain sight. It lives captive on the face of the obvious – the people, events, and things of the day – to which we as sophisticated children have long since become oblivious. What a hideout: holiness lies spread and borne over the surface of time and stuff like color."*

The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston is a Native American elder, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation, an author, and a retired bishop in the Episcopal Church and this is how he describes our need to see more clearly: *Sometimes, in this troubled world of ours, we forget that love is all around us. We imagine the worst of other people and withdraw into our own shells. But try this simple test: Stand still in any crowded place and watch the people around you. Within a very short time, you will begin to see love, and you will see it over and over and over. A young mother talking to her child, a couple laughing together as they walk by, an older man holding the door for a stranger – small signs of love are everywhere. The more you look, the more you will see. Love is literally everywhere. We are surrounded by love.*

He also said more in another reading we heard this morning, "Do Not Doubt What You See". He describes the silent witness of all of creation at our current climate crisis, "Do not doubt what you see: the world is warming, the waters are rising, and the winds are coming stronger than before. Do not turn away, do not pretend not to see, but speak the truth and set the spirits free".

Perhaps a lesson from our dogs: what do they do when they see something they don't like? The mail carrier, the UPS driver, the neighbor across the street with the loud lawnmower? They bark; Bark, Bark, Bark. Maybe we need to bark more and find our voices. Francis barked at the poverty he saw in his world; we need to bark more at all the injustices we see in our time today. Whether you look out your window or turn on your tv, it is time to bark.

Jesus in that very small gospel encouraged the disciples to have more faith and to have more faith to see more clearly. Jesus is pointing to our own lack of wonder – for failing to see what is hidden in plain sight. What we seek is already right here, in front of us. When we are aligned with the will of divine love, everything we command will happen because it is already happening. In some mysterious way, we are welcomed to participate in this unfolding work of love. We are, Dillard says, impelled “to divinize, transform, and complete the world.” That’s at least as monumental a task as ordering a mulberry tree to take root in the sea. May we have the faith to undertake it.