Sermon, October 4, 2026
The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi"
"They're Uncomplicated"
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine
Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

One of the most famous quotes attributed to Francis of Assisi is:

Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.

Many, both clergy and lay alike, are fond of that quote. It can be used as a reminder to preachers who drone on and on thinking if I throw enough words out on a topic maybe I'll get lucky and one of them will stick. Others who abide by the slogan, "You have to walk the walk as well as talk the talk" are fond of it because it connects the way we live our lives to how we put the Gospel into action.

This is a challenging quote to someone who gets paid for throwing 1,000 to 1,200 words at you every Sunday (relax pets and humans alike as we are up to 137 already and I am determined to stay below 1,000). This quote really sets up a useless dichotomy between speech and action. Don't we need both? Besides, the spirit behind it can be a little arrogant, intimating that those who "practice the Gospel" are more faithful to the faith than those who preach it.

But you know what? There is no evidence that St. Francis ever said such a thing. None of his disciples, early or later biographers have these words coming from his mouth. It doesn't show up in any of his writings.

Francis himself was quite a traveling preacher, sometimes in as many as five different villages in a day, often outdoors, from a bale of straw or on the steps of a public building. But let's suppose for instance that we would have a sermon with as few words as possible. Well who can do that? Why our guests of honor at today's liturgy, our pets!

Now at first you might want to nominate the most loquacious of the animal world: Mr. Ed, the aptly named for our feast day - Francis the Talking Mule, Babe the Pig, Paddington the Bear. But hey none of them were available today so following the dictates of Crosby, Stills and Nash, "Love the one You're with", what if your pet was to give the sermon, what would they say? Now I know you will tell me that your pet communicates with you through their eyes, demeanor, barks, meows, wags, etc. If you also tell me that your pet communicates to you with actual words then we have a team of trained mental-health professionals ready to discuss this with you in a private space after the service. Because if we follow the principle, use as few words as possible, then our pets should be excellent homilists. What would we learn from them?

Let's go to the story of creation that we've used in place of a psalm these Sundays of the Creation Season. What gets created first? the fish, the birds, the sea monsters, then all the beasts and the crawling creatures, and only after all of them comes humanity. And this is mirrored in the great Creation psalm, Psalm 148, where the praise of God comes forth from flying things, creeping things, mountains, hills, wild beasts….cattle and that THEN and only then do we get to human beings who, if you are keeping track, come after the cattle.

That's right. We come after the cattle. Because we're complicated.

I think maybe animals, in their not-nearly-as-complicatedness, have something to teach us about praise. Nadia Bolz-Weber describes it this way, "I'm pretty sure that praising God is not the same as sycophantically stroking God's ego because God has low self-esteem and created a cosmic entourage just to remind God how great he is. I'm pretty sure the cattle aren't doing this. The way in which creeping things of the Earth praise God is to simply creep on the Earth. The creatures simply praise the creator by being creatures. Their being is in itself praise of the source of their being".

I think the difference is that the cattle don't get their identity or sense of worth outside of God. Sea creatures aren't looking to the Dow Jones or their Body Mass Index to know their value. Their value, as ours, rests in their createdness by God.

How beautiful is that? And what if the same is true for us? We are creatures who praise our creator simply by being creatures. Your being is in itself an act of praise toward the source of your being. Remember that the next time you are at an event or party and are introduced to someone new. "Hi, I'm John and my very existence is an act or praise toward the source of my being".

Maybe it is this kind of uncomplicated love and acceptance we glimpse in our sweet little animals. This is a day to work on our relationships – our human ones if need be, but especially our relationship with the world of creatures. Right now, today, look at your pet either here in person, on your phone, or just your own mental image. If you don't currently have a pet, adopt one: the woodchuck that has been eating the vegetables out of your garden, the raccoon that raids your garbage can at night, the hummingbird who flits at your flowers, the bat upstairs in your attic. What can we learn from them? Watch them glory in being creatures, watch them glory in being crteatures! The bigger question is can we glory in our own createdness and accept that our value comes not from our accomplishments but in being created by God? And yes at times our pets will come to us seeking affection which we may or may not be in the mood to dole out but know that God never tires of shining love upon each and every one of us, no matter our accomplishments. And if there is a crow out there who are known to count out loud and understand the concept of zero, that my friend is 994 words. A promise made is a promise kept.

Blessing for each individual pet:
May God your creator and preserver bless, defend, heal, and keep you, this day and always. Amen.