

This Way to Narnia: Grace through Pets

Based on Transformed by the Dog by Brian Bantum, CC June 2023, p. 36-7

Romans 8:18-23, Creation Care Sunday, October 1, 2023

Creation Care Sunday is closest to St. Francis of Assisi's birthday on October 3. St. Francis loved birds and animals and in 1225 wrote the canticle of creation that we sang this morning All Creatures of Our God and King. Last year when I preached on Creation Care Sunday, I talked about St. Francis and that some churches do a blessing of pets on that Sunday which led to a conversation with some youth in the coffee room about an OMC Pet Blessing being a good idea so here we are. For those who do not have pets, it may feel like the church has gone to the dogs this morning but please bear with us we all experience God's grace of acceptance and love through many mediums, people, nature, songs, scripture and even pets.

In our Psalms and Romans readings this morning - humanity is an integral part of the created order: we are not independent or set apart from nature. The healing of nations and creation - the realization of Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom in Isaiah 11 involves a moral claim in the present tense - the reconciliation of people with God, each other and nature. C.S. Lewis wrote about the gathering of children and animals with the Christ figure in the lion Aslan in a new heaven and new earth called Narnia. Lewis named Narnia after a town in Italy near Assisi which makes me wonder about the connection to St. Francis.

The stewardship of creation, the renewal of the environment, must be high on the Christian agenda. We all are certainly aware of creation groaning this summer under oppressive heat and wildfires and we were groaning with it breathing smoke and

watching trees die from drought. I've gone the route of the pet blessing this Creation Care Sunday because it's easier to talk about dogs than the climate crisis but I must speak into the climate crisis a bit - then we'll get to the dogs.

We all know we need to reduce carbon and we are switching to hybrid/electric vehicles and shopping Thrift and recycling and planting gardens and putting in solar panels and we switched all our church lights to LED but we are going to have to do even more. As I sit in traffic in my electric vehicle surrounded by semi-trucks hauling our food, gas and toys, I wondered why I bothered with my EV. Ultimately, we're all going to have to fly less and buy less. We are going to have to give up the comforts of our middle-class lifestyle and go back to living like our frugal grandparents. Our lifestyle has been unsustainable on the earth and we've put our future generations in jeopardy. We can say we didn't really know the impacts of our lifestyle but now we do.

Recently a group of young people in Montana ages 8-16 sued the state of Montana for not caring for the environment through unregulated oil and gas development and they won! (Christian Science Monitor Sept. 2023) I wonder how that would play out in Saskatchewan. The next generation is saying enough development at the cost of the earth. I worry what our church children will say about how seriously we took the #1 issue of their time. So before they sue us, let's distract them with talk about pets!

God gave us pets to show us God's sense of humour and grace towards us. A reflection by religion professor, Brian Bantum from Christian Century magazine called Transformed by the Dog I Did Not Want. I did not want a dog. Life with almost-grown children and a quiet house seemed idyllic. Work early, long bike rides in the afternoon, a

little art, long lunches with my spouse. Every so often she would ask about getting a dog and I would say no. Life was full and good. But then something else started to grow. The quiet house crept from peace to an almost restlessness. I often kept the TV on most of the day just to feel like someone was there. And the house seemed so big now during COVID.

So when she asked before COVID about getting a dog, I hemmed and nodded and thought, yeah, someday. Some life to fill the big, quiet house might be nice . . . someday, but I was open now because COVID created the space to bring in a puppy.

As soon as our little bernedoodle puppy first toddled through our house, I was in love. The vast expanse of time that became segments of walks, feeding, playing, working, being stared at to play, being herded to our room, sharing our bed with a living weighted blanket that seemed to always find the crook of our legs or get wrapped around our heads.

Each day the rhythm settled deeper. The love of being joyously welcomed back after ten minutes in the basement began to fill all the spaces of what's normal, of what happiness looks like. On my first trip away after having the puppy for a year, I thought I'd be so excited for a good night's sleep, for a day without a scheduled walk and work limited to two-hour work windows. But I couldn't sleep—my legs kept searching for the weight, the warmth. I got up early and took a walk anyway, trying to keep myself from asking to pet every dog I passed.

How did I become this dog person? This was a different kind of feeling than life with a partner or kids, because I had always wanted to be married, always wanted to be a father. But this dog life was a surprise. Sometimes it is not the ends that we dreamed

of for years and years that most change us. Sometimes it's the surprises, the tethers we ran from only to find they were always what we needed, that help us to find our truest selves, to find peace.

More and more, my walks with my dog prick a question my students have asked: Why? Why does a life with God matter? Why does this life on earth matter if everything is about what happens after we die? To be honest, this is a question that I have tamped down in my own faith from time to time, even as a person who believes in the consummation of all things, that the incarnate Word's journey into us identifies with all of us who were and all who will be—that we are all in Christ, now and forever. Yes, that all will be saved—but the question remains. What, then, is the point of this life here on earth, here and now?

I wake up to my dog's joy that I am here, and I realize I am changed. God is in this earthly life with a pet, too. The newness of this animal in our life wasn't just comfort or a little bit of joy. She was a point of transformation—of who I would be and what a whole life would look like living in the moment. It's something like the parable of the laborers, the latecomers who were paid the same wage as those who came early. Maybe this is what is so hard to remember about Christian life: it's not a wage earned or lost. The coin is the means to live life for a day without hunger, to buy a few pieces of fish and bread and gather around a table.

In the face of fewer and fewer people seeing church or God as a way of life, I wonder if we really need to fear for our institutions or even for God. Instead we might ask ourselves how we've changed for knowing God. How have our lives become richer in our contingencies and connections? And in this life, every day, there are ways of

seeing how God abides, including through our pets. Each day that we cling to God in all of the surprises of grace, the membrane between earth and Narnia stretches a little thinner.

For our closing prayer, I'll use Wendell Berry's poem The Peace of Wild Things:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.