

BLESS THE BEASTS AND THE CHILDREN

Jesus touching children. Blessing them. Maybe even kissing babies. It's one of the more endearing lines from today's readings. And probably in the top ten of favorite Jesus sayings. "Let the children come. The dominion of God belongs to children." A great thought for a congregation with several dozen little kids, and a dozen or more babies.

There are the children. And then there are the animals. All the animals here for a blessing this morning. How do these go together? Well, many of you know that I was a big-time Carpenters fan in the 70s. And one of their songs came to me a few days ago: *Bless the Beasts and the Children*. A title song from a movie of the same name. Children and animals are vulnerable in our world. Neither have a voice. They are dependent on our care and advocacy.

The children show up in the gospel. The beasts show up in the reading from Genesis. From the ground God forms every animal of the field and bird of the air. And the man names them all. But it isn't enough. A helpmate, a companion is needed. God blesses human relationships. We could even say that God is a God of relationships. That God's very nature is relational.

Yet we dare not forget the psalm. The name of God is exalted. Human beings are crowned with glory and honor. We are made a little lower than God. And we are given dominion over creation: birds, fish, beasts. Coincidentally, our Wednesday scripture study has studied Psalm 8 the past two weeks. We discussed how dominion doesn't mean living as if we were the only ones on the earth or abusing the earth and its resources. We now pay the heavy cost of our pollution. The extinction of many species. The effects of climate change and global warming.

Theology and ecology cannot be separated, we learned. God blesses the earth. In this time of ecological crisis, we now bless God by caring for the fragile blue planet we call home, to quote one writer. In doing so, we also honor the legacy of Francis of Assisi. Blessing animals in this sacred space is but one way to remind us of our calling to touch the earth gently. To walk and live gently on this precious earth.

Beasts. Childen. Blessing. Dare we mention Jesus' tough words about divorce and adultery? Probably in the bottom ten of least favorite Jesus sayings. They have caused hurt and harm to many. Let's not forget that Jesus is being asked how he interprets a Torah passage on divorce. And there were disagreements then about the grounds for divorce. Though Jesus' answer seems harsh, in light of our understandings, that is, Jesus is being radical in one way. In that time only men had rights and adultery was only a sin against a man. Yet Jesus says that a man can also be guilty of sin against a woman.

Who receives God's blessing? There are still disagreements, about people who have been divorced. Or about same-sex unions. So much more could be said. Yet, perhaps we hold two things in tension. God's desire that human relationships of love and fidelity flourish. And that sometimes relationships fail and it is more painful for one to continue than to end. Like always, we turn to God for mercy and to one another for the blessing of forgiveness.

In this sacred space we come each Sunday to bless God for the gift of creation, the gift of life, the gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Sometimes when we receive, we share that blessing through touch. Through blessing a baby. Through blessing other holy objects. And today, through blessing, touching our animal companions. Yet in all of it, we go forth to make our lives a blessing to others.

A brief video of baptism from Lakeview Presbyterian down the street is on their Facebook site. It happened several weeks ago. It involved the baptism of a little boy who was almost two years old. As the pastor read the opening words and prayer, he was very restless. Trying to squirm from his dad's arms. His mom tried to focus his attention on the water. Finally, when the pastor took him in her arms, he totally relaxed. She put water on his head three times. Touching him. Blessing him. But then an amazing thing happened. His little body reached down toward the font. He wanted to touch the water. But he did more than that. He put water on the pastor's head. Not once but three times. Who knows what he meant. But you can be sure that all those who were there received blessing. A little sermon in itself.