
Come Unto Me All You Who Labor and Are Heavy Laden

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Feast of St. Francis; The Blessing of the Animals

*Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*
Matthew 11: 28-30

What a fun day this is! Yes, yes, I know we are supposed to be proper in church. Most of us tend to think that means being subdued and somber. We dress well and sharp when we come to church on Sunday mornings. We are refined. We are refined and dignified.

But on this day, for at least one day in church, we bring animals into this sacred space. And when we do that, something wild and exciting happens. Our animals don't care what they are dressed like, or how properly they are supposed to act. Our animals get curious about things that we have forgotten about. Our animals pull at us. And when they pull at us, they pull something out of us.

Yes, our animals pull something out of us. First, they pull our embarrassment out of us. Then, they pull all our pretension out of us; they pull our self-consciousness out of us. They make us run after them. We lose some of that artificial dignity. They pull our fussiness out of us.

Our animals pull our emotions out of us. And in so doing, they finally pull our joy out of us. Yes, our animals give us joy.

In short, our animals give us soul. This is good and proper, for the root word of animal, "animus," is also the Latin word for "soul." Animals are beings with soul. They can give us "soul," too.

I began my ministry at the Cathedral of St. Philip six years ago, on the Feast of St. Francis, when this church was rollicking with animals. I don't think many people heard my sermon that day.

And I myself remember, really, only one particular thing I said that day. "This place needs these animals," I said, "because this Cathedral needs soul."

This Cathedral, and all of God's church, needs soul!

Since that day, six years ago, this church and I have gone through a lot together - some great times and some sad times. We've thrilled one another, and we have disappointed one another. We've sung together and we have cried together. We have embarrassed one another, and we have made one another laugh.

But through it all, God has blessed our souls through each other. Through the grace of God, we are growing in soul.

Today, it may feel like all these dogs and cats don't like their leashes. I can see them pulling and stretching and pulling you all over the place.

But they need those leashes. We all need leashes. We need guidance and care, protection and gentle leading.

We need yokes, just like Jesus said we did. Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Wear my leash, and I will give you rest.

Last week, I read this lesson at every church meeting I attended. We are trying to read the Bible lessons for the week at the beginning of every meeting in our new building. Last week, we opened the Chapter meeting with a short Bible reflection on this passage.

One member reminded us that Jesus never said he would bear our heavy burden; in fact, Jesus implied that he would actually give us another burden. Take my yoke upon you. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light. He wants to give us another burden, on top of what we are already carrying?

Well, yes! We are meant to bear burdens in life. Indeed, we are meant to bear the burden of Christ. That means we suffer when another member of Christ's body suffers. When someone is sad, we are truly sad. When someone is upset about something, we can be upset with them. When someone is filled with joy and soul, we can share that joy and soul, too.

It is when we bear burdens with one another, that we become friends with one another. When we bear spiritual burdens with one another, we become soul friends with them.

We remember St Francis today because he was a "soul friend." He bore the burdens of the poor around him, even though he came from a wealthy family. According to beautiful legend, he was even able to bear the burdens of animals. He shared soul with them.

From these animals today, we learn something about soul. Soul means willing to be embarrassed for a greater good. Soul means cleaning up after one another. Soul means running eagerly to the next minute of the day. Soul means not caring if we look disheveled. Soul means accepting the joy of pure life.

I believe God wants each of us to have a soul friend, someone with whom we can share burdens - and someone whose burden we are actually willing to bear for a while. Our pets and animals do teach us, but they also point us to the possibility of sharing soul with one another.

All of us can be soul friends today, letting the burdens we have shared together turn into the joys of pure life. We can be soul friends, rejoicing in the labor of this new Cathedral space. We can be soul friends, giving one another rest in our weariness, sharing the common yoke of Jesus himself.

Yes, we wear that yoke together. That yoke is easy. It is the yoke of gentleness and goodness, grace and peace.

AMEN.

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