
Lord, Help Me to Become the Person My Pet Thinks I Am

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
The Feast of St. Francis – Year A

This is a difficult sermon to preach. Why? Well, it is hard being a Tennessee football fan standing before a Georgia congregation after a 41-0 defeat yesterday. To add insult to injury, you all brought your dogs to church. Come on, where's the compassion?

We welcome you here this morning, and a special welcome to all four-legged friends.

I'd like to share a story this morning. Ten years ago, I left seminary and was sent to Albany, Georgia, where I was charged to serve one of the parishes in that city. If you know anything about South Georgia, you know that a popular sport is bird hunting. On St. Francis Sunday in South Georgia, parishioners will bring their bird dogs to church so they could be blessed before the bird season.

I remember going on my first quail hunt. I was dating Margaret Ann, and her father and brother took me on my first hunt. I remember them placing me in the wagon to observe before it was my turn to hunt.

What I saw was a miracle. I remember those German Shorthaired Pointers (you know, those dogs that bark and run around the yard all the time) covering tremendous amounts of terrain, then stopping and pointing toward the birds. It was beautiful.

Then, those spaniels I grew up with (all I thought they did was bite and steal my toys) were released and worked behind the pointers, into the brush, to flush the quail.

Finally, the large labs (who I thought just chewed on shoes) spotted and retrieved the fallen birds. With their soft mouths, they brought the birds back, undamaged and perfect for cooking.

Watching the dogs was beautiful, majestic, and holy!

I remember coming down off the wagon to hunt, and my soon-to-be father-in-law explained the rules again, then pulled me close and said, "Look into my eyes. There is one last thing to tell you. If you accidentally shoot something, you better shoot me and not my dog."

We love our pets and would take a bullet for them. We would do this for two important reasons: 1. Pets are our companions among life's journey, and 2. Pets provide us with blessings in our lives.

Companions. Our pets are companions who walk with us through the joys and the sorrows of life. In the passage from Genesis, God creates Adam and then there are a lot of animal companions before there is Eve. In the life of St. Francis, it is said that as he proclaimed the gospel animals accompanied him on the journey.

A few months ago, I was at the gym and a woman was lamenting because her cat of many years had died. I offered my condolences and she responded by telling me that this cat was with her when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She said the cat was there through the difficult treatments, and sat next to her when she had no energy to get up. That cat was

her companion through the difficulties of cancer.

Our pets are companions through the joys and the sorrows of this life. In scripture, we hear the word *Emmanuel*, “God with us.” If Emmanuel means God with us, then the companions who walk with us through the ups and downs of life are of God, because they walk with us along the way.

Blessings. Our pets shower us with blessings. When you come home from work or school, what does your pet do? They are often running in circles happy to see you. They bless you and give you joy. Their joy is infectious and lifts your spirits.

You know what? Your pet also sees you at your worst. They are in the house all the time and see you when you’re arguing with your spouse, or when you’re arguing with your mother, or fighting with your brother or sister. They are sitting there when you take that phone call and say those things you probably shouldn’t say. They listen to it all and they love you anyway. They choose not to focus on your imperfections, but see only the good and bless it.

There is an old bumper sticker that went something like this, “Lord, help me become the person my pet thinks that I am.” Our pets don’t see the imperfections, they just see the good and shower us with blessing and love.

Imagine what the world would be like if we took our pet’s mindset and applied it to our lives. What if we didn’t focus on the bad but saw the good in others and blessed them. What if we blessed those at our schools, work, and other organizations the same way our pets bless us. I bet the world would be a different place if we chose blessing instead of division.

Our pets bless us and inspire us to be a blessing to others.

Let me conclude by reminding you about the conversion of St. Francis. Remember, Francis was kneeling before altar, before the crucifix, when he heard Jesus speak to him. Jesus said, “Francis, Francis, go repair my church which is in ruins.” Consequently, Francis set out to do the hard work of rebuilding the church in Italy.

When God calls you, when God sends you out to do the work God has given you to do, God places people (and four-legged creatures) in your life to be companions and to offer blessings along the way. It was true for St. Francis, and it is certainly true for us.

Today, we give thank for our two-legged and four-legged companions, and for the ways in which they bless our lives. Amen.