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## *Freedom for Our Souls*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**The Feast of St. Francis – Year B**

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest....Take my yoke upon you, ...and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:28-29*

It's St. Francis Day again! Welcome!

Someone has said that St. Francis is the most admired saint in Christianity, but also the least imitated. Yes, we enjoy the merry notion that a man could live in such harmony with the natural world that he could actually speak with animals. But our admiration is rather naive, like a fairy tale. Most of us think of St. Francis as a kind of Christian Dr. Doolittle.

We imagine, in our fantasy, that we too want to live this way. We could follow the example of St. Francis quite literally and to its fullest. But I do not think that most of us want to do that.

St. Francis' ability to live in such deep peace with the natural world arose from previous decisions of his, decisions that most of us do not want to imitate. He gave up, abandoned, a very comfortable and aristocratic life, a life which many of us actually strive for. Francis even renounced his own father, who was a wealthy and fairly upstanding textile merchant. I don't think most of us want to go there, either. Francis renounced all material possessions in his decision to follow Christ. At one point, he renounced even the clothes he was wearing and stood completely exposed in the street. Please do not do that.

No, most of us this morning are not called to exactly the same vocation as St. Francis was. We sit quite nicely clothed, with our pets. We have not given away all our possessions. Most of us find no reason to renounce our parents. Thus, most of us will never follow the exact path of St. Francis.

But we do want to do right. That is why most of us are here today. We do want to live a life in the kingdom of peace and in the kingdom of God. We do want that rest for our souls which Jesus speaks of. We do want to experience God in the natural world, even if we cannot always articulate that desire.

I think that is why we bring animals into our lives. It is why we delight in bringing animals into church and blessing them.

These animals give us a glimpse into the kingdom of peace and rest. Like Francis, these animals are innocent and unpretentious in the presence of God. They are not clothed. They are not clothed with the kinds of masks and cover-ups that human beings usually wear.

And, like Francis, these animals—in a way—give up their families to come into our lives. They do not know, usually, who their natural parents are. They give up their family genealogies. (Some of us may keep their pedigree; but they do not.)

In fact, these animals are models of the devotion of St. Francis. These animals, certainly our pets, teach us something of the affection of St. Francis, and therefore something of God. These dogs, for instance, are devoted and eager and impetuous. These are the characteristics of faith, the characteristics of those who get things done in this world.

Would that our Christian faith was so devoted and eager and impetuous and ardent! Now, I know the cats are not impetuous, at least not the cats I know. They are carefully obstinate. The part about cats that I admire is their curiosity. There is no door or small opening or back shelf anywhere in our houses that the cat has not investigated. Would that our Christian faith was so curious, too.

Dogs and cats. Our children are like dogs and cats, in their seasons, aren't they? Someone once gave me great advice about raising children. Here's the secret: When your child is young, before they are around twelve, they are a dog, a loving, lapping, hugging, huggable dog. When they become a teenager, they become, quite simply, a cat.

We bless these animals today, because there is something in them that teaches us about God and about faith.

The word "animal" comes from the Latin word, "anima" which means "soul" or even "breath," "breath of life." It is as if, long ago, our wordsmiths answered the question whether animals had a soul. Will our pets and animals go to heaven? Do animals have a soul? Well, the very word "animal" means soul! These animals today give us soul.

They show us a carefree spirit that is, indeed, close to the carefree soul, the spirit, of St. Francis. Francis grew close to God only because he was able to abandon the burdens that most human beings thought they still had to carry. By renouncing very good human responsibilities, he found a reliance upon God that he otherwise could not have known. As Jesus advised in the Gospel of Matthew, Francis found rest for his soul, by taking up the yoke of Jesus.

I am glad the animals here today have leashes, some sort of yoke that keeps them connected to their owners and lovers. Let those leashes be lessons for us too. The animals are carefree and soulful, teaching us of freedom in the Spirit; but they also have yokes connected to the Master.

Do you know what keeps kites aloft and flying in the air? The string does! The anchor! If you let go of the string, and the tension, the kite falls to the ground. The kite flies gloriously in the wind, the kite stays aloft because it has a leash! Animals teach us of freedom in the Spirit, but especially because they have leashes!

Our yoke is Jesus. It is Jesus who connects us to the Master, but who also wants us to know freedom in the Spirit. Freedom from care.

Many of the cares and burdens which obsess us daily do not need to. We can be free from those cares and burdens, free like St. Francis, and free like these animals among us. That freedom and rest comes from taking on the yoke of Jesus, not a burden, but an anchor, a base, a commitment that lets our souls soar.

We bless St. Francis today. We bless these and all other animals. In so doing, we bless that presence of soul, that breath and life, which resides in each of us, and which longs for the yoke of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

AMEN.

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