Let Everything That Has Soul Bless the Lord!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Feast of St. Francis – and the Blessing of Animals

"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 learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

–Matthew 11:28-29

Welcome! Welcome to every one of you today, no matter how young or old you are, no matter how many legs you have, or don't have! No matter how weary you are or how heavy your burdens are. I hope all of our guests today are wearing some sort of yoke or leash!

We are offering another kind of yoke today. We are here to celebrate the Feast of St. Francis today, and we celebrate his life by blessing animals!

At some point in our lives, especially in our younger lives, we may have asked this familiar question:

"Do animals go to heaven?"

Today, we declare the short and simple answer, "Yes!" It has to do with the very word itself: "Anima." The old meaning of *anima* is "breath." An animal is something that has breath, that breathes.

And, since breath and spirit are the same word in our old languages, then the meaning of *anima* can also be "soul!" The Spanish word for "soul" is "anima." An animal is something that has soul!

Thus, of course! If animals have souls, they go to heaven! It's part of the very meaning of their name! Animals, by definition, are souls! They go to heaven!

Today, as we celebrate St. Francis and the blessing of animals, we remember something else. Heaven is not just a place where people go when they die. Heaven is not some place that we simply wait for.

Heaven is the place, right now, where soul is. We celebrate animals here this morning, because animals help to give us soul! We are celebrating heaven, the place of soul. The presence of these animals this morning – boisterous and happy and noisy and lively—is a foretaste of the joy and soul of the kingdom of heaven!

Let me give you a quick overview of St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis had soul. The popular, and uninformed image of him sounds a bit like Dr. Doolittle. But Francis the saint was not called, originally, to minister sweetly to docile pets. First he was the rather ostentatious son of a wealthy merchant, and he enjoyed the fine and rich things of life. It was after he experienced war, and deep sickness, that he found soul — in the needs of the poor and the leprous. Compassion struck him. As he was praying in the Church of St. Damian, the call came to him three times. "Francis, go and rebuild my church, which you see is falling down."

He took "church" to mean St. Damian's Church (where he was), but also the catholic church, the church universal. He took "rebuild" to mean "serve," especially serving the poor. He was not afraid to become poor himself, outraging his merchant father. In one famous incident, Francis renounced his life of privilege by removing the very clothes which his father had given him and laying them down.

The life of St. Francis was a continual learning to give things away. And the more he gave away, the more soul he had. St. Francis had soul. That ministry of St. Francis renewed the whole Christian church. He rebuilt not only St. Damian's Church, but the entire Christian Church, because he gave it soul.

We enjoy today the pleasant images of St. Francis ministry, and they are good and fun: the warmth of animals, the beauty of creation, the lion playing with the lamb. But for Francis, that ministry came at a cost. He was more, so much more. During the Crusades, Francis miraculously sneaked through enemy battle lines in order to speak with the Moslem sultan about the gospel. He suffered pain and illness, at one point bleeding from his hands and feet; and so finally he was able to welcome even death. He called death his dear sister. Yes, he exalted all of creation, the blissful and the painful, the beautiful and the ugly, because he touched the soul of each experience.

By blessing animals in this place today, the Cathedral of St. Philip is following Saint Francis and is blessing soul.

The ministry of the Cathedral of St. Philip is to bless soul. But taking care of animals can be messy. And blessing soul can be messy. We bless soul in tough and messy ways, just like St. Francis did. We touch not only the tame and the docile, but also the deathly ill and the repulsive; we touch not only the desperately poor, but also the comfortably wealthy.

That holy touching is part of the heritage of the Cathedral of St. Philip, and it will always be the call of the Cathedral. Find the wounds of Atlanta and the world, and touch them with soul.

Ultimately, there is only one source of soul. That source was there at creation itself, "when the world was charged with grandeur, brooding over the bent world with warm breast and with ah! bright wings" (as Hopkins wrote). Soul is the breath of God.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." We all carry burdens, and we all wear some kind of yoke. Sometimes the wrong yoke. We spend money for that which does not satisfy. We put ourselves in cages and containers just like these animals.

Jesus offers another kind of yoke. "My yoke is easy; my burden is light," says Jesus, who is the source of the world's soul. St. Francis knew that source. We know that source, too. It is the Holy Spirit, speaking to us in mystery from these walls, speaking to us in the mottled beauty of these animals ("Glory be to God for dappled things").

God touches us with holy breath this morning, with soul! That breath is the Holy Spirit of passion and compassion. Take in that breath, take in that soul, and then let it sing out this morning. *"Lauda Anima,"* we sing; "Praise my soul the king of heaven." Let the walls sing out. Let the animals cry out, too. Let everything that has breath –Let everything that has soul! – praise the Lord!

AMEN.

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