

When our beloved golden retriever, Francis, died in August, we were inundated with a number of kind and empathetic notes from so many at St. Francis. Among my favorite pieces of correspondence was a card from Peggy Flood. Along with her condolences, she related an experience her daughter, Lizzie, had while a Middle School student at Trinity Catholic. During religion class, Lizzie was told by her instructor that dogs do not have souls. Quite upset over this declaration, Lizzie began to cry when she got home that afternoon. Seeking to comfort her—and put an appropriate perspective on this experience—her brother, Patrick, counseled, “Lizzie, of course dogs have souls. It is Catholic Middle School religion teachers who do not.”

This past Sunday we celebrated the Feast of St. Francis, patron saint of animals and the larger creation, and patron saint of our parish. Both services were open to animals (mostly dogs, though we did have, quite literally, a very cool cat who joined in as well). People received communion and pets were given a blessing. The mood, to say the least, was very relaxed. It’s hard not to be more calm when our four-legged friends are around.

Indeed, the reduction of stress is palpable when our dog engages kids at King, where Marnie works, and I think the same is true in worship. What formality we have is easily shed. What’s important are the relationships with the creatures who enrich our lives. Which is the point that St. Francis understood. Relationships with the created order enrich our lives in whatever form they may take. It is not just the human animal who is worthy of attention. The whole of nature is a part of the divine, you got it, *CREATION*. Thus, the posture that we have toward the created order should continue to evolve away from any type of exploitative engagement to the type of action that sustains life and the world we live in.

Following the service, we began our first book discussion of the program year, and it was serendipitous that we read Vicki Constantine Croke’s book entitled *Elephant Company*. The author relates the amazing life of Englishman Jim “Billy” Williams and his life’s work in Burma with elephants and the astonishing story of the help they were able to provide during World War II and the defeat of the Japanese. Throughout the book, the amazing abilities and connections of elephants are underscored, along with the aptitude of many other creatures. It is clear that Williams recognized a bond with these creatures; he also recognized that humans had much to learn from the created order, in general, and the elephants, in particular.

One example that Williams wrote about in his diary was the issue of river crossings. Invariably, after the monsoons, the tributaries in Burma were overflowing with rushing water. Often, river crossings were rather dangerous affairs. When a herd would cross a river, the group would begin by waiting. They waited until the appropriate time—and they could not be forced—when one elephant would step forward and lead the way across to the other side. As Croke notes,

Here on the bank of the river was another of life’s lessons from the elephants that could be applied to people: Dominance is not leadership. From animals, Williams said, people could learn about taking ‘authority without being a bully.’ The big tusked could splash into the water but no one would follow them. What was needed was confidence rather than bravado. In fact years of experience had taught the uzis that the leader would not be male. The notion of the wise matriarch remained alive among them. (p. 129)

The sensitivity of Williams toward these amazing creatures changed the way that the elephants were raised and trained. Gone was the brutal and cruel “breaking of the spirit” that was known as kheddaring. In its place, a sensible and humane practice of positive reward and support was implemented.

Such a shift seems so practical and obvious. Yet, we still live in a world where practices toward animals are barbaric, not to mention how we treat each other as humans. The wisdom of Williams and St. Francis and all the saints down through time who recognize the interconnectedness that we share with the wider creation is not that there is some zero-sum game and only humans can be treated as valuable. Rather, all creatures are sacred. They are worthy of respect and kindness and mercy. (Interestingly, the work of Temple Grandin regarding the treatment of animals who are to be slaughtered for food recognizes this as a fundamental truth.) When we practice these characteristics toward others and the larger creation, we all become better versions of ourselves, and the world is made better. It’s a small leap, but it is important. Lizzie’s brother *was* right: dogs (and by extension animals) have souls. We just need to keep reminding the Middle School religion teachers of this. For whether they know it or not, their souls are connected to these creatures on life’s way.







