

Sermon: The Ensouled Ones
Scripture: Job and Romans
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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At the center of the Christian faith tradition is the theological principle of *incarnation* – the divine becomes enfleshed, the infinite becomes manifest in the finite, physicality, a doorway to spirituality. In a couple of months we'll celebrate this at Christmas, the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ which some theologians speak of as the 2nd incarnation. The 1st incarnation, they explain, is creation itself. The scientist and theologian Teilhard De Chardin says it beautifully this way “God is constantly becoming element, drawing all things through love into fullness of being. God invests Godself organically within all creation, immersing Godself in things, in the heart of matter thus the world is unity.” Therefore physicality is not separate from spirituality, body is not distinct from spirit. There is not sacred and profane, but rather all of it, all of creation, is sacred, arising out of love and bound for love in the end... and this becomes most evident in relating to the animals around us.

I hope for all of us here that the theological question “do animals have souls” has long since been answered in the affirmative. In fact the very Latin word that we get our English word animal from is “animus” which means soul, so this was not questioned originally and maybe has only become a question since we've become a more utilitarian people, raising and using animals for the things we want and need and losing track, maybe a little bit, of the fact that they are ensouled. It's hard to run testing labs and slaughterhouses while acknowledging that animals have souls. But it's easy to know that they do when you look Naia or Rumble or Percie or Chester or Gus or ... look them in the eyes and know their distinct personalities and it's clear of course animals have souls.

How do we define soul – well, one dictionary says “the soul is the immaterial part of a human being or animal which is regarded as immortal.” But I like Fr.

Richard Rohr's definition better - "the mirror of creaturely relatedness that reflects the vitality of divine love." And that mirror shines through the body as well as the spirit of humans and animals. And we are coming learn this or I should say learn it again as we acknowledge through science something that the mystics like St Francis of Assisi and Meister Eckhart wrote about millennia ago, the mystery of the complexity and depth of animal life and presence and how that life reflects God.

Check out the book "When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Life of Animals" and consider how lionesses babysit for one another and how Whales sing songs that are remembered and repeated for particular occasions in their lives and how rats giggle when they are tickled and how crows remember their captors by face and will hold grudges against them and how wolves have been witnessed in the throws of grief at the loss of one of their pack and how chimps play peek-a-boo and gorillas have a sense of humor and Elephants will accommodate the patterns of their herd to tend to the most vulnerable among them and how they cry for their dead, and the stories go on and on. We are surrounded by an abundance of life on this planet earth and not just mindless life but sentient life that feels and knows and reacts and cares like we do. How arrogant can we be to think that we are the only ones with souls and how important for us to face squarely and acknowledge that the animals around us experience love, joy, fear, shame, grief, nostalgia, loneliness not so different from ourselves. We are surrounded by ensouled creatures and we must treat them as such. Our love of God reflected in our love of neighbor, needs to include the neighbor who are the animal kin around us. Amen? Amen!

This is why we are taking an offering during this worship time and giving it to a humane society to acknowledge the animals around us as the neighbors they are who are in need of our compassion and care. So I'd like to ask some of the youth to come up and share with us about where our offering will be going today...

OPENING PRAYER

Creator God, You have made a beautiful world filled with wonder and surprises! It all reflects your creativity and goodness and

With grateful hearts we praise You!

Creator God who has gifted us with the gift of animals, those in the wild, those on farms, those in our own homes, those with us now and those who have passed but have left their love within us,

With grateful hearts we praise You!

Creator God, you brought into being that which we could not imagine, life we cannot see without the aid of microscopes and enormous presences that swim the oceans and walk the land, the beautiful and the odd, the gentle and the fearsome, creatures nearby and those we can only see in pictures from remote regions of this planet earth,

With grateful hearts we praise you God!

We thank you for abundant life; for the birds we hear in the morning, for the drone of insects when we are outside, for the vast tapestry of life which is interwoven with our own,

With grateful hearts we praise you God!

We thank you for the gift of our own animal companions; For the joy they bring us, For the unconditional love and forgiveness and patience they bear which teaches us about You; For them as confidants, listeners, stress-releasers, playful companions, fascinating and distinct souls every one,

With grateful hearts we praise you God!

With grateful hearts we praise you God for animals and for all of life and our place therein. In Jesus' name we pray together in the words he taught us...