

The Blessing of the Animals on the Feast of St. Francis 10/06/24

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On August 15th in Citrus Heights, CA, David Hoffman was running errands when he got a frantic phone call that his home was on fire. His disabled wife Melissa Hoffman and their pets were trapped inside. The call was from his daughter-in-law who said she tried to get Melissa out of her bedroom, but the heat and smoke were so intense she had to flee. David rushed home and saw the duplex in flames. He started to run inside to Melissa, but it was so smoky and hot that it blew him back. David didn't know then that Melissa had reached for her wheelchair and fell to the floor, and their dog, Maya, was lying on top of her — which rescue workers said helped save her life.

He broke open the back window and started spraying water inside from the garden hose shouting at Melissa to keep talking, promising her that they were going to get her out. One of the rescue guys caught a glimpse of some fur on the floor, and they found the dog on top of the woman. They grabbed the lady and the dog and got them out to rescuers at the back window. Rescue workers thought Maya, an 8-year-old pit bull mix, was no longer alive when she was pulled from the duplex. She wasn't moving and didn't appear to be breathing. However, not only was the dog still alive, rescuers said that by lying on Melissa's chest and protecting her face, Maya was a hero. The dog was unconscious on her chest, protecting her airway, and ended up taking the brunt of the heat," Leonard said. The rescue workers quickly got a mask on the dog to give her some oxygen which revived her.

Capt. Mark Nunez, spokesman for the Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District, said the way the dog positioned herself on Melissa is what saved her until firefighters could rescue her. "Think of it as someone standing in front of you and blocking the wind that is pushing in your direction," Nunez added that he's seen this behavior before with dogs. "Calls that we have seen that involve dogs, there's usually an instinctual bond that the dog has with their owner, and they feel the need to protect them." Melissa, who suffered third-degree burns on 60 percent of her body, was taken by ambulance to a hospital. Maya is now wearing a special sweater over her burn wounds while they heal. That dog absolutely saved her life and is a hero. *(Story from news article)*

This story about a pet saving its owner's life comes as no surprise to most of us. There is a special bond that develops between a pet and its adoptive parent. Our pets have given us much love, companionship, and joy. And while at times they can be both expensive and a nuisance to take care of, they are well worth our efforts. I know for myself that animals make me laugh and I love delighting in their presence. I think I will always have a dog.

Today, many of you have brought your pets to church to be blessed. What does it mean to bless someone or something? What does it mean to bless an animal? To bless is to show favor, be gracious to, to be pleased with, to benefit. As Episcopalians, we bless people, places, and things that we value as well as bless God as an act of worship. Blessings or benedictions are pronouncements that ask for or celebrate well-being, health, peace, and happiness. This includes the blessing of a marriage, the blessing of a congregation, the anointing and blessing of the sick, and yes...the blessing of our animals which we have come for today. It is God who first blessed animals at their creation. In the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, Scripture tells us that God blessed the fish and birds, the work of the fifth day, and animals, the work of the sixth day. God blessed them to be fruitful and multiply and also gave them to us as helpers and

nourishment. So blessing animals is an ancient activity as old as creation, a thing we do in imitation of the Creator. When it comes to blessing our pets, we are asking God's grace to nourish them and protect them and to remind us of their intrinsic value. It is a gesture of thanksgiving for their affection and companionship. Our Christian tradition reminds us that all blessings ultimately flow from God, and so we sing: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Today, Christians use the word bless in a variety of ways. Most of the time it means to confer prosperity or happiness upon another. We bless someone who has just sneezed as an expression of goodwill and the desire for continued health. To bless others is to build them up, to fill them with encouragement... "to add strength to another's arm."

What does it mean to add strength to another's arm? Anything that relieves their burden in life. Anything that helps them breathe more easily. Anything that lifts their spirit or alleviates their distress. It can be a small thing or large. I know that many of you here today are people who bless others by caring for the sick, the grieving, and the lonely. Some of you bless by providing delicious food at coffee hour or at potlucks and special events. Some of you are encouragers, blessing others with words of affirmation. In fact, words of affirmation are one of the simplest ways to bless someone. This includes sending them a note, writing them an e-mail, or texting them. A word of encouragement is like oxygen to the soul.

Unfortunately, we are currently living in a country where instead of blessing one another, many have taken to cursing one another. My brothers and sisters in Christ, this ought not to be so. As the book of James recently reminded us, "our tongue can stain the whole body and can set on fire the cycle of nature... For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species. But no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing."

People of St. Luke's, as we gather together on this Feast Day of St. Francis, let us commit ourselves to guarding our tongues, and to be a people who bless, who affirm one another, who add strength to each other's arm.

- Blessed are you, the faithful remnant, who continue to gather together in this church each Sunday to worship God. You are the salt of the earth!
- Blessed are you, the compassionate ones, who reach out to the sick, the homebound, and the hurting. You are the ones who illuminate the dark corners of life.
- Blessed are you, the generous ones, who give of your time, talent, and treasure to support this church community. Thank you for sharing your gifts.
- Blessed are you when you greet one another with a smile, a word of kindness, or a gesture of forgiveness, for you are reflecting the Spirit of Christ.
- Blessed are you when you suffer pain, grief, disappointment, and loss and yet get up each day to try to make a difference in our world. You are the children of the Light.
- Blessed are you the righteous ones, who cast your vote according to whatever is true, honorable, just, and pure. You are the ones who remain faithful to your baptismal promise to respect the dignity of every human being.

And may God bless each and everyone of you, along with your beloved pets...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. +