
How Do You Learn to Love a Dog?

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Feast of St. Francis – Year C**

Hopefully you have a picture. This picture, which I love, was taken last year at this service by our photographer who's now waiting on the next great picture. But I love this picture because I think it captures the spirit of St. Francis. I love this picture because I think it captures the spirit of St. Francis because I think this is just the way that Francis looked at animals. When you look at this picture focused on the face of this dog with the background obscured, that dog's eyes looking back at you, you are St. Francis. And you, I think, are focusing on that animal in front of you just the way that St. Francis did, not only animals, but birds and trees and rocks and people. It is said of St. Francis that he couldn't see the forest for the trees and that was a good thing. The story of St. Francis's conversion bears this out I think. If you want to hear the longer version come to 11:15.

But the shorter version is that St. Francis, at the beginning of the 13th century, did what young sons of nobles do. They sought to establish themselves, create an identity in battle with gallantry and chivalry. And St. Francis, like others in his town, rode out to do exactly that. Now, the wars in the hill towns in Umbria and Italy were kind of like football rivalries in the Southeast. It was a home and away game series. It was continuous and it provided constant opportunities for young men to gain their reputations.

St. Francis, we are told, failed miserably in this undertaking. But while in prison and sick, wound up treating people in ways that were memorable. Treating a member of his own battalion who apparently had tried to run away or betrayed the brothers, but in some sense, he was being isolated in prison. St. Francis treated him the same as everyone else.

But when St. Francis came home, the moment, I think, of his conversion was when he was riding on a horse in the hillside and came upon a leper because St. Francis was afraid of lepers in some deep, visceral way and he knew it. But upon seeing this leper, he decided that it was time to confront his fears. He leapt from his horse, embraced the leper, gave the leper the money that he had and his cloak, and then went on about his way.

It was in that moment I think, that St. Francis moved from trying to gain glory by external courage to trying to gain glory by internal courage - by facing his fear or, if you will, creating space inside of himself for God. And it was after that moment that he renounced his privilege and took up his ascetic life of poverty and care.

But story after story after story has St. Francis looking at the person in front of him, treating them with dignity and respect, and loving it. This is my favorite part about St. Francis. It wasn't that he embraced all of these hardships for self-control or external glory. He did it because it brought him joy, which is why he became one of the first Italian poets, that is to write in the native language, why he composed beautiful canticles and why people just came out to follow him. It is said that no one ever looked into the brown eyes of St. Francis without knowing that he was deeply interested in them.

Now I've had my own conversion. No, not ordination. We have a COVID dog.

We got this wonderful energetic Brittany just before COVID started. Did I mention energetic? This dog does not stop. Finally, we realized that she was too much for us and we hired a dog trainer.

The dog trainer told us very simple things like, when she pulls on the leash, just stand there. Once she realizes that you aren't going to give in to that pressure, she will relax. No.

Millie, our Brittany loves to counter surf. Do you know what counter surfing is? She pretty much lives her life on her hind legs and she will get up on the counter and get any item of food that is there. "No problem," the trainer said. "Just put some dishes and pans and things that'll make a lot of noise right on the edge of the counter and

when she goes to counter surf, she will knock them over. It will scare her and she will never do it again." No.

Millie barks. A lot. "No problem", the trainer said. "She is trying to protect you. When she barks, simply say thank you. Once she knows that you're okay and that you recognize the threat she has spotted, she'll stop barking." No.

So as we began to go through COVID and the same trauma that infected everybody else's house began to increase in ours. You know. Everybody's home all the time. And in my house, everybody seemed to be on a Zoom call, right? My stepson is in school, my wife is teaching Godly Play. I'm on Zoom calls and people are constantly walking through other people's Zoom zones. Did I mention that Millie was energetic?

And then one day I came home. Millie met me at the door, jumped up on her hind legs, and hugged me. And I decided simply to embrace her. And I decided to stay in that position until she let go. She didn't let go. But somehow from that point on, she was what I was looking at. Not my world that was being disturbed, not the cleanliness that I had at one point dreamed our house would have. Not the things that I loved before they were chewed. Not even the bacon that seems to vanish for my breakfast almost all the time. Because I grew to love Millie. Holding her in front of me made me a more loving person which I think is the point of St. Francis.

St. Francis lived a pattern of life imitating Christ because it made him a more loving person. He founded a religious order not to make a point, not to isolate men so they could grow closer to God all by themselves, but so spiritually gifted people would be wandering the streets and everyone they encountered would have a spiritual adventure. That's what the Franciscans were doing. They were lovers and it was fun.

St. Francis was a troubadour. St. Francis was a poet. St. Francis was radically in love with all of nature, all that was created because in it he could see God.

So I hope you'll take this picture with you. Thank Dan Murphy for it. And remember that this view, the view you are taking when you look at this picture, is the spirit of St. Francis. The loving, long look at this beautiful dog who without knowing who you are, is loving you back. Amen.