

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/St. Francis day,
October 5, 2025
St. Michaels Church
By The Rev. Joshua Wong

Focus: Our pets play serve to bring us play.

Function: I am preaching this sermon to give thanks to our pets and to bless them.

Let us pray:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

Yesterday was the Feast of St. Francis, who was born in 1181. He is the patron saint of animals and the environment. It is an important day in the Christian tradition to commemorate his life and his patronage of animals and ecology. He is beloved more and more in our church because he possessed qualities we really need today. For one, he was a prolific gifted mediator between inter-religious dialogue, but the most well-known trait that he possessed was a sensitive connection towards God's created world and our care for it. Francis' profound love for creation and animals, his dedication to the poor, his peaceful disposition, and his emphasis on childlike joy and gratitude for God's gifts made his message and life universally appealing and inspiring across the centuries.

Following Francis example, after the homily, we will bless the animal friends in our lives. A study from the University of California Davis Health found that our pets improve our mental and physical health. Some of the benefits include the reduction of stress and anxiety; ease feelings of loneliness; provide unconditional love and support; create a calming presence; and giving a sense of purpose to us pet parents.

A small study from Massachusetts General Hospital found that levels of neurohormones like oxytocin — which is involved in pair-bonding and maternal attachment rises when we interact with our pets.

I would also add that our pets motivate us to see play as an important part of our daily life. They intensely look at us to go out and play, and to take long walks with them. Like many who grew up in the church, I discovered *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, as a child by my Aunt Jennie who was a scholar and who recently passed away. Unfortunately, I only read a little of C.S. Lewis' works. In *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, there is a scene that was witnessed by two children, Lucy and Susan, when a mad chase began with a velvety lion on the hilltops. All three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. The book says, "It was such a romp AS no one had ever had except in Narnia." And the funny thing was that when all three finally layed down

together panting in the sun, the girls no longer felt IN the least tired or hungry or thirsty.

A description of "such a romp as no one had ever seen," made me wonder about something I had never thought about as a christian growing up. Does God laugh? Does God have feelings? Does God romp in joy? Does God enjoy some play time? Growing up, I never heard a word about God (or Jesus) laughing, joking, or doing anything fun. As a child, it would have been considered disrespectful by other evangelicals— even heretical to imagine the Son of God goofing around with his disciples, or playing hide-and-seek with the children who flocked to him. And yet, we know that children loved to be around Jesus. As anyone who has worked with children, we know that kids hate to be around boring adults; they love adults who play. And the children loved being around Jesus. Jesus must have been a fun, relatable dude to hang with! I can attest to this in our Children's chapel every Wednesdays. They love to interact, they love to volunteer as an acolyte, they love to ask questions and play. Last week, they learned the song Father Abraham, with all the body motions.

Indeed, the very nature of play is not often the first thing we think of when we talk about God or Jesus. Why did we lose play in our lives with God? Maybe its

because we think that His holiness, we believe, required a certain solemnity and decorum. Hence, we Episcopalians are known as the Frozen Chosen!

But play should be a part of our worship, our service, and our personal lives. Play brings the best out of us. The ironic disconnect, is that play is featured everywhere in God's creation. You have seen for yourself how fun, imaginative and creative God is in his created natural world. Take for example the many combinations of colors in just the species of parakeets in the rain forest, or the Panda bears. They play, tumble, roll, miss tree branches, and act silly. Their bodies were designed to take those tumbles. Play is a fundamental part of every human childhood, and many, if not for most wild animals as well. According to some researchers, play burns up to 20% of the survival energy of young animals, despite the fact that play doesn't provide food, shelter, safety or anything necessary for survival. Yet evolution continues to favor such an apparently useless activity. Or, maybe it's not useless after all, but necessary?

We need to learn from nature to include play and enjoy time with God. When we take ourselves too seriously, we can have a tendency to be blinded by our own pious pretensions. But when we invite creativity and spontaneity into our relationships with God, we who are created in God's image mirror the playfulness of our Maker.

During my seminary years, I served under a few priests in different churches who did not seem to value play as part of their understanding of service. They were very serious all the time and people became scared to be around them. I remember priests sternly reminding me after each service what I did wrong. It was then that I made a conscious decision that when I become a priest, I want my parishioners to offer their best, but if there was a mistake, to know that God smiles down with grace. I wanted a church that was filled with joy and laughter. Nehemiah 8:10 says, “The joy of the Lord is my strength.”

Joy comes from a time of play. It’s easy to forget that play is necessary in our christian journey. Play refreshes our souls. The Episcopal Church encourages our priests to go on yearly retreats to refresh, and restore our minds, souls and bodies. I’ll be attending such a retreat time in November at the Episcopal Retreat Center in Yosemite. There are Episcopal retreat centers across the U.S for priest and laity to use. Some retreats may be silent retreats, some are for reading, others are on discussions topics and others are simply for you to relax and explore. If you look at the Weekly Diocese Newsletter, which I recommend you subscribe, you will see tours led by priests and scholars to explore places in the Bible. These tours are part of play, they offer learning and exploration that fills our souls. Play can also include, reading a good soul-fulling book, listening to good music, taking an online

class, or doing yoga outside. Our diocese has a great fun camp for adults and children opened all year long called Camp Stevens in Julian, the city famous for its pies. God has blessed us with vacations of rest. It is in these moments that we can see God in nature, and give praise to God. As St. Francis believed, “All things reflected their creator’s love.”

God wants us to have a balance life. Yes, we spend a lot of time focusing on the serious side of God, but often forget simply to enjoy time with God. Daily meditation, practicing centering prayer is a good way to spend time with God. Let us imagine ways in which we can foster intimacy with God by opening our hearts to hear His voice, share our thoughts, and experience His presence in a personal and meaningful way throughout every day.

So, whenever you wonder where God is in your life, look outside of yourself as St. Francis did. Francis was continually overwhelmed by the beauty of the world; and not just trees and flowers, but also the wounded, the broken, and the sad. His childlike joy and gratitude for God’s gifts gave him a vivid sense of the sacramentality in all of creation.

Today we thank God for our pets who fill our souls with the lesson of play, the lesson of care, the lesson of sharing, and the lesson of unconditional love. Let’s

now bless the animals we have been given into our care, whether they are here, at home, or are no longer with us.

Can we ask all who have pets to stand up with them or with their pictures and tell us their names and age.

Let us pray.

Loving God,
St. Francis of Assisi showed us that your family of creation extends from the flora and fauna to the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and the pets in our lives.

For their companionship,
We are grateful.

Because their love is unconditional,
We are always humbled and in awe.

Thank you for animals, wild or tame who bring color and warmth to an often grey and cold world. We remember our pets who have passed on, we thank and praise you for what they have given to our lives. We ask that you will bless us to be good pet parents, who care and love our companions.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen.