

When I was about 8 years ago I would ride the school bus home from school. I was the last one to get off of the bus so my bus ride was rather long. My bus crisscrossed throughout the countryside of Hopkins, SC outside of Columbia. During that particular schoolyear one of guys on my bus, Darryl, said that his dog had just had puppies and he wanted to know if anyone wanted one. My bus driver, Tanya Clarkson, was very excited to get one of the puppies. Tanya was a high school student back when students drove school buses. So when we arrived at Darryl's house we waited as he brought 3 puppies onto the bus. One was given to Tanya. One was given to Matt. And one was given to me. Yes, I arrived home that day from school with a brown mutt. I named that mutt Tanya after my bus driver that I had a crush on and Tanya was my one and only dog for the rest of my childhood.

On this day that we are blessing animals I invite anyone else to share their stories about their animals.

Today we are leading our first ever "Blessing of the Animals" service at Allison Creek. This type of service originates from the Catholic Church and is usually held around October 4th which is the Feast of St. Francis. St. Francis is the patron saint of animals as well as merchants and ecology.

In the year 1182, the very wealthy Pietro Bernardone returned home to Assisi, Italy from a business trip to France and discovered that his wife had given birth to a son. Pietro became angry when he was told that the child had already been baptized and named after John the Baptist.

Pietro wanted his son to follow in his steps as a businessman and certainly not be a preacher. So Pietro changed the boy's name to Francesco which means "Frenchman." The boy began to be called Francis.

Francis grew up very wealthy and spoiled. When he became a teenager he was somewhat of a playboy. When he briefly joined the army he insisted on gold armor and a magnificent cloak. But then Francis had a dream that his life was going in the wrong direction and he returned home.

The story is told that one day Francis came upon a leper. Francis got off his horse and kissed the leper. The leper returned the kiss. Francis was filled with joy. When Francis rode off he looked back to see the leper but the leper was gone. Francis took this as a sign from God.

One day Francis was praying in a church and he heard the words from God, "Francis, repair my church." Francis interpreted this to mean that he was to repair that particular little church. So Francis stole fabric from his father's shop and sold it to get money to repair that particular church.

When his father found this out, Francis' father sued him to get the money back. This case went before the bishop who ordered Francis to return the money and Francis was told by the bishop that God would provide. Francis returned the money to his Dad, tore off all of his clothes except his undershirt, and told his father that he was no longer his son. That God only was his father.

Francis soon discerned that when he heard that he was to "repair the church" it was not the little church where he prayed that he was to repair. Francis discovered that "repairing the church" meant the wider church which had become riddled with corruption.

This was the time when several popes were leading the Christian Church to take up arms against the Muslims and reclaim land in the Middle East. We know these battles as the Crusades. During the 5th Crusade Francis decided to go to Syria to convert Muslims. However, Francis decided to go directly to the sultan, the sovereign Muslim leader, and talk directly to him. The sultan was very moved by Francis. The sultan told Francis that he "wanted to convert to Christianity which is beautiful but that he knew that this would lead to both of them being killed."

Francis lived a life of serving the poor and outcast in Italy. Eventually these followers formed the Order of the Franciscans.

But there is one story from his life which models why Francis is the patron saint of animals and why we are blessing animals today.

While Francis was staying in the town of Gubbio he learned of a wolf so ravenous that it was not only killing and eating animals, but people, too. The people took up arms and went after the wolf, but those who encountered the wolf were killed. The villagers became afraid to leave the city walls.

Francis took pity on the people and the wolf as well and decided to go out and meet the wolf. He was desperately warned by the people, but Francis insisted that God would take care of him. A brave friar and several peasants accompanied Francis outside the city gate. But soon the peasants became terrified and said they would go no farther.

Francis and his companion began to walk on. Suddenly the wolf, jaws wide open, charged out of the woods at the couple. Francis made the Sign of the Cross toward the wolf who immediately slowed down and closed its mouth. Then Francis called out to the wolf: "Come to me, Brother Wolf. I wish you no harm." At that moment the wolf lowered its head and lay down at St. Francis' feet, meek as a lamb.

St. Francis explained to the wolf that he had been terrorizing the people, killing not only other animals, but humans as well. "Brother Wolf," said Francis, "I want to make peace between you and the people of Gubbio. They will harm you no more and you must no longer harm them. All past wrongs are to be forgiven."

The wolf showed its assent by moving its body and nodding its head. Then to the absolute surprise of the gathering crowd, Francis asked the wolf to make a pledge. As St. Francis extended his hand to receive the pledge, so the wolf extended its front paw and placed it into the saint's hand. Then Francis invited the wolf to follow him into town to make a peace pact with the townspeople. The wolf meekly followed St. Francis.

By the time they got to the town square, everyone was there to witness the miracle. Then Francis offered the townspeople peace, on behalf of the wolf. The townspeople promised in a loud voice to feed the wolf. Then Francis asked the wolf if he would live in peace under those terms. The wolf bowed his head and twisted his body in a way that convinced everyone he accepted the pact. Then once again the wolf placed its paw in Francis' hand as a sign of the pact.

From that day on the people kept the pact they had made. The wolf lived for two years among the townspeople, going from door to door for food. It hurt no one and no one hurt it. Even the dogs did not bark at it. When the wolf finally died of old age, the people of Gubbio were sad. The wolf's peaceful ways had been a living reminder to them of the wonders, patience, virtues and holiness of St. Francis. It had been a living symbol of the power and providence of the living God.

Today we bless animals. Today we also celebrate how extending peace and care for animals and people is a calling from God. AMEN.

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-http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=50

-<https://www.anaflora.com/articles/saints-sages/saint-1.html>

-Text: Genesis 1:24-31

-Given: October 23, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)