

To Love & Be Loved

Genesis 2:15-19 & I Peter 4:8-11

Rev. Jo Ramsey, July 13, 2014 ~ Blessing of the Animals

Have you ever seen the commercial that came out recently for Iams Dog food? It has a giant Irish Wolf Hound named Rocky, I mean he is GINORMOUS! He is waiting at the window, whining with anticipation. Someone opens the door, and he bolts out. Rocky finds what he's waiting for stepping out of an SUV -- A soldier, a young woman in uniform arriving home from deployment.

As the dog licks all over her face, the voice explains, "Rocky had no idea why Dawn was gone for so long, but he'd wait for her forever, and would always be there with the biggest welcome home. For a love this strong, Dawn only feeds him Iams. The announcer goes on to explain how great Iams dog food is. It will "keep Rocky's body as strong as a love that never fades." In the last scene, Dawn is lying down on the cement driveway, and Rocky is covering her with kisses. Then he lays right down along the length of her body, literally covering with his love.

As we were preparing for today's Blessing of the Animals, a lady we know who is undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer, said she was so sorry to miss such a special day. Her immune system just isn't up for it. "But," she said, flipping open her smartphone, "my dog sure deserves a blessing." She showed us a picture of herself lying on her couch, looking pale and pretty depleted. And there, stretched out on top of her, nearly covering her completely, was her collie, Max. "He seems to know just when I need him. He sticks especially close on my worst days."

Our animals cover us, don't they? Sometimes with their bodies, often with their kisses, usually with their fur. Always, they cover us with their love. When we need comfort and companionship the most, our animals offer it by crawling alongside or on top of their human, as if to say, "I'll cover you, without question, without exception."

When you come home from school downcast and downtrodden, and your cat absorbs your tears into her furry, purring side;

When you're facing a call from the doctor after a round of tests, and your horse carries you down the trail until you find hope again;

When you've lost someone you've loved, and your dog won't leave your side.

In so many ways, they tell us, "I'm here, you're not alone. I've got you covered...."

In a world where love almost always comes with strings attached, our pets offer a different equation. "Here's my love. Give me a little love back, nothing more. A treat would be nice, but I'll still love you. No matter what, I'll cover you with unconditional love."

Unconditional love, that beautiful comfort, is the most profound gift we receive from our animals. Even when they misbehave, do something they shouldn't on the rug or sharpen their claws on our couches, they still love us, and we love them. It's everyday love -- the wag of the tail, the rub against the shin, the neigh as we open the stall, a sweet song at sunrise (or a cockle-doodle-doo).

I read once that when God was creating the world, he said to himself, "I need somebody strong enough to pull sleds and find bombs, yet gentle enough to love babies and lead the blind. Somebody who will spend all day on a couch with a resting head, and whose supportive eyes lift the spirits of a broken heart." So God made a dog.

Why did God make dogs and cats and horses and hens and turtles and ferrets and guinea pigs and snakes? Remember Genesis tells us that on the sixth day God made the sea creatures and the birds of the air. Then he made the wild animals of the earth, cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground. Then finally, God created humankind in his image. And God saw that it was very good.

But, in the second version of creation, the one we read this morning, God formed Adam first and placed him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it. Afterward, God decides it is not good for man to be alone, so what's he do? God decides to create the animals. Out of the ground, the Lord God forms every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brings them to the man who decides what to call every living creature. Isn't that funny?! When it came time to make companions for Adam, God started with the animals! It's later that God makes Eve, and as we know, that's had its ups and down!

No matter what the order, God created all things out of the vast expanse of his love. Whether we're talking about animals or people, earth or elements -- the very fabric of creation expresses God's desire for relationship. Love makes the world go round. Love is why we're here. Love is why we do what we do. We are designed for love. That's why we fill our homes with kittens and puppies, hamsters and horses, partners and children. We want to take care of things. We want to cuddle things. We want to love and to be loved.

No matter what we've been through, we know in our hearts that love is real and it matters. We are connected by God's web of love which covers and contains us. Yes, there's lots of stuff that needs covering. Life is messy, and that's how it was designed -- fur and flesh, slobbering tongues and litter boxes, love and forgiveness. It's all good.

A little child was asked, "What is love?" The child answered, "Love is when a puppy licks your face." The grown-ups laughed, but then he added, "even after you've left him alone all day."

That is unconditional love. Love that covers a multitude of sins. Love that covers months apart. Love that covers chemotherapy. Love that covers broken hearts. Love that covers us with wet kisses. Love that covers us with grace. Love that covers us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!