



Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost || October 6, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Proper 22B || Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8; ezs 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16|| The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

Companions along The Way

What a gorgeous morning we have to share some reflections on our scripture passages this morning. It is a treat to dive in and review them with our friendly companions in the sanctuary and beyond.

Have you ever considered *why* we read, pray and reflect upon our scriptures? We are invited to use these ancient and beautiful texts as conduits for bringing us closer to God – to better understanding God's intentions and expectations for us, and it is lovely to have these assigned texts this morning- this special morning when we are concluding our celebration of the season of Creation Care and we are blessing the creatures who makes our lives better.

Our gospel passage from Mark offers a familiar scenario – a compact passage aimed at multiple audiences and with many moving parts. Jesus and the disciples are continuing on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus' earthly ministry is limited, and the group is approached by Pharisees who try to trip Jesus up with a trick question. The Pharisees are trying to get Jesus to break the law or commit heresy in order to justify arresting or detaining him and putting a stop to his counter-cultural ministry. This morning's group of assembled Legal experts asks Jesus about the status and availability of divorce.

If you are not familiar with the backstory and significance of this particular inquiry or trick question, let me catch you up on the scriptural soap opera that is under way! These Pharisees are asking this loaded question at the behest of King Herrod, who divorced his wife so that he could marry his brother Philip's wife Herodias. King Herrod had been castigated by John the Baptist who said, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's

wife” and so he was jailed. In response to John’s preaching against Herrod’s divorce and remarriage, as a gift to Herodias, John was beheaded.

This is the context in which Jesus successfully weaves his teaching about God’s ideal hope for each of us to be together and joined summarized by the sentiment that we echo at EVERY church wedding, “what God has joined together, let not man put asunder”!

Our texts invite us into the origin of this notion – from the Hebrew scriptures of Genesis we are treated to the Jahwist account of creation and God’s declaration that, “It is not good that the man should be alone”. This morning we are treated to God trotting out all manner of animal and bird all of which are given names and are offered to man as a companion for their life’s journey.

God spotlights each creature with delight and spends time hoping that the human will find that any one of those creatures might be a sufficient and fulfilling companion and partner. St. Francis is our patron saint of our love and celebration of animals because he referred to them as his siblings, and he was convinced that animals provided tangible insights into the nature of God.

St. Francis found animals to be enchanting and intriguing, with distinct gifts, adaptive talents and offered endless opportunities to watch peacefully go about their business. In a bit, we will pray the prayer that is attributed to St. Francis, who asks God for a variety of qualities and gifts that he undoubtedly witnessed by loving and studying the animals around him.

These days, we are likely to treat our pets as members of the family, as companions who enhance our lives and depend on us for food and shelter, and health care. More of them are welcome to join us at work. As a puppy, my dog Luna used to love to join me on the commuter Ferry on our way to work at Downtown Crossing. She was dubbed our “workplace wellness puppy”! We understand that some animals are called to have actual jobs of support – working animals who provide comfort and support OUR health care. These relationships are truly sacred, and echo parts of our relationship with God.

At the end of this morning’s gospel passage, Jesus calls the disciples’ attention to children and invites the children to come to him. But the disciples try to make them scam. These children are boisterous, impolite, and not at all valued in ancient times – they represented extra mouths to feed, a burden until they could be productive, and Jesus is focusing on them, loving them, calling them to him. He wants to touch them. He wants the disciples to

see him pick up these wholly (and holy) dependent creatures, bless them and cradle them in his arms.

This is who will inherit the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says. These children are what Jesus' ministry is all about. (From a few weeks ago) The children are the greatest among them, and he wants the disciples to see them as he sees them. As divine creatures and gifts from God. He delights in their exuberance, their lack of manners, their absence of guile and lack of pretense. Their total innocence and their neediness. THIS is what Jesus is honoring and taking delight in – and it rocks the disciples' world. They had tried to keep the children away – to shield Jesus from the bedlam that comes with children – AND dare I say, with animals!

God does not want us to be alone, and has made these marvelous animals to be among our companions along the way. It is my honor to meet and bless your animals, and it is a joy and delight to share our sacred space, music and worship with them. I give thanks and bless you for your love and companionship for each of them and I hope that you will feel god's loving light shining upon you as you tend to your blessed animals.

Thank you for sharing your animals and enhancing this Sunday for any of us who may be feeling lonely or needing solace. I'm positive that each of you who have a precious pet has a story of how this creature came into your life. This morning it is a pleasure to give thanks to God for God's part in connecting you, and God's delight that you are not alone. Amen+