



Oscar*

Animal Blessing Service

Rev. Roger Jones

All-Ages Sunday, October 6, 2013

UU Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #203, All Creatures of the Earth and Sky; All God's Creatures Got a Place in the Choir (printed insert; song by Bill Staines); #18, What Wondrous Love Is This.

Sung Prayer: #15, The Lone, Wild Bird (Solo by Rev. Lucy)

Shared Offering: To support [Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services](#)

Pastoral Prayer

Spirit of Life and Love, we give thanks for the gift of life and the gift of this new day. We gather together in the search for insight, purpose, belonging, and hope.

We extend our concerns to one another. Among us are those who are bearing a sorrow, living with a health crisis, facing a life transition, worrying about finances or employment, or holding concerns about others in their lives. In particular, we lift up Bob, still in the hospital, receiving treatment for two serious infections in his body. We send our care to Bob, Maxine, and their family. We lift up Steve, one of our team of greeters and ushers, who broke his leg two weeks ago. He is at home and receiving help.

Let us now lift up the names of others we might hold in our thoughts. Whether speaking their names and their needs aloud or whispering to ourselves, let us bring them into the space of our sanctuary. [PAUSE.] May they find ease and wellbeing, courage, and love.

This world has no lack of strife, danger and hurt. To the zones of conflict and the places of pain around our globe, we extend prayers for peace, healing and liberation. We give thanks for the generosity and courage of those who strive make a difference. May all be safe.

Let our care extend to all those in distress in our own community, state and nation. On the minds of many of us is the U.S. government shutdown, and the bitterness of current political battles. We lament the closure of national monuments and parks, the loss of important services, and the loss of morale in the workforce of 800,000 furloughed federal employees. We call to mind the families and business owners whose livelihoods are at stake. We extend our care to those living with frustration or fear. May our civil servants know that their work *does* make a difference. Let everybody who feels called to serve know their calling merits respect and gratitude. Let our leaders feel called to serve the common good, and heed that calling now.

For many of us, these are days of celebration and achievement. In particular, Cathy and Linda have made their wedding vows to each other--in the presence of children,

grandchildren, and friends, legalizing a loving partnership of 33 years. Recently marking 50th wedding anniversaries are Jack and Fran, and Edith and Dennis. Now let us lift up the names or events that are lifting our spirits in these days. Whether speaking aloud or whispering, let us bring all the good news into the space of our sanctuary. [PAUSE.] May one another's good news give all of us reason for joy.

Today in this place, we gather as young and old and in between; we gather as humans and other creatures on this unusual occasion. We celebrate the joy and comfort that animals can bring to life. As we do, let us remember our place in the web of life.

May hands of care embrace and uplift every member of the human family, and all creatures of earth and sky. May the Great Spirit of Life hold us in peace—and may peace go out from this place all the way to the ends of earth. Blessed be.

Now, with the living sounds of many ages of people and the sounds of other species around us, let us enjoy a few moments of stillness, and breathing together. These moments will be followed by a prayer in music. [Rev. Lucy sings #15, "The Lone Wild Bird."]

Testimonials

Bruce, with Sweetie, the cockatiel parrot.

Sonia and Kris, with Bardette, the Labrador guide dog.

Offering

For Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services

Homily

When I was 28, before I was a minister, a friend of mine tricked me into taking his cat. He asked me to keep it while he went on a trip for several weeks. When he came back, I told him: "I think I'm going to get a cat now."

"Why not keep this one?" he asked. All black, short haired, slender, lively and cute, her name was Yoyo. She would leap up toward the ceiling and bounce off the walls, or race down the hallway, pounding the hardwood floor as she leaped. That's why he named her Yoyo. She did this in the middle of the night. That's why he wanted to give her away.

I was not such a light sleeper, so she didn't bother me as often as she had bothered him. In any case, her nighttime disruptions were a small price to pay for the entertainment value of her daytime playfulness, and for her companionship. A few years later, when I was traveling out of town, Yoyo became ill. The friend who was caring for her alerted me by phone, brought in other friends from our church to observe her, and took her to the veterinarian. Her lungs were filled with fluid, and she passed away. I was out of state when this happened, so I never saw her again. As the days passed, I was surprised by how much I missed her. I felt sad for a long time.

Cats. We human beings have bred felines into docile, miniature versions of their ferocious relatives of the wild. Cats come in a variety of colors, shapes, and hairstyles because we have engineered it that way. Countless cat books and websites reveal the knowledge of cat breeders, veterinary scientists, animal behaviorists and experienced handlers. We know a lot about cats, yet much remains a mystery. Many of us value their company, and we joke about their selfish expectations that we should care for them. Newspaper cartoons may speculate what goes on in their heads, if much of anything does. Yet much about cats is a mystery. Some people tell amazing stories about them.

Oscar is a cat who lives in a nursing home. Not as a patient—he grew up there. He lives on the third floor, where people with advanced cases of dementia can receive extra care as they near the end of life. He has free reign of the halls.

One day, he sleeps atop a desk in the doctors' charting area. He opens his eyes and looks around. Mrs. P. is wandering down the hall, pushing her walker in his direction. Oscar hisses, but Mrs. P. doesn't notice.

He hops to the floor, has a drink of water, and makes his rounds.

[He] sidesteps Mr. S., who is slumped over on a couch in the hallway. With lips slightly pursed, he snores peacefully Oscar continues down the hallway until he reaches ... Room 310. The door is closed, so Oscar sits and waits. He has important business here.

Twenty-five minutes later, the door finally opens, and out walks a nurse's aide carrying dirty linens. "Hello, Oscar," she says. "Are you going inside?" Oscar lets her pass, then makes his way into the room..... Lying in a corner bed and facing the wall, Mrs. T. is asleep in a fetal position....

[Her cancer is in its final stages. Sitting nearby is her grown-up daughter.] "Hello, Oscar," [the daughter] says, but he ignores her. He jumps on her mother's bed and examines the patient.

[After a while, a nurse comes in, Oscar sniffs the air, hops off the bed and goes down the hall. He goes in the open door of another person's room. In this room,]

Mrs. K. is resting ... in her bed, her breathing steady but shallow. She is surrounded by photographs of her grandchildren and one from her wedding day.... Oscar jumps onto her bed and again sniffs the air. He pauses to consider the situation, and then turns around twice before curling up beside Mrs. K.

One hour passes. Oscar waits. A nurse walks into the room to check on her patient. She pauses to note Oscar's presence. Concerned, she hurriedly leaves the room and returns to her desk. She grabs Mrs. K.'s chart off the medical-records rack and begins to make phone calls.

Within a half hour the family starts to arrive. Chairs are brought into the room, where the relatives begin their vigil. The priest is called in to deliver last rites. And still, Oscar has not budged, instead purring and gently nuzzling Mrs. K.

Thirty minutes later, Mrs. K. takes her last ... breath. With this, Oscar sits up, looks around, then departs the room so quietly that the grieving family barely notices.

The story of Oscar appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.^{*} In 1997, Dr. David Dosa wrote an article about this cat living at a nursing care center in Rhode Island. Since then, he's written a book, *Making Rounds with Oscar: The Extraordinary Gift of an Ordinary Cat*.

Dr. Dosa writes that Oscar has the ability to predict when a patient will die. In his first two years, Oscar "presided over the deaths of 25 residents of the third floor." This enables the staff to notify loved ones to come and say goodbye.

Oscar is like a furry, four-legged Grim Reaper, with a tail. I wonder why he does this? He visits when someone is near the end of life, and after they die, he departs. Apparently he doesn't snuggle up with just anyone who could use his company. He shows up for the time of passing, and he leaves.

I wonder what he gets out of this behavior? He's a cat. Oscar's not a human being, so we should be cautious about giving human explanations for this gift he seems to have. Dr. Dosa says he's an ordinary cat.

I wonder if other cats have his gift. If other cats were to grow up in a nursing home, would they behave the same way? It's a mystery. It makes me think of the mystery I would contemplate when I looked at my cat Yoyo sitting beside me. "What's going on in there?"

Perhaps there is much to learn about animals. For example, we have learned that pigs are smarter than dogs [sorry to the dogs in the room], and that dolphins and whales communicate with others of their species by underwater songs. Yet the more we learn, we realize that so much about animals is a mystery.

Oscar the cat can predict a person's passing within an hour, better than people can—even better than the doctor who writes about the cat. I wonder what Oscar senses at our passing. What is happening with us? The transmigration of the soul? Our spirit heading to heaven? Are we giving off the vibrations of comfort and safety? Is there a special smell at the time of death, and Oscar is waiting for a whiff?

To me, the lesson of all this is one of humility. If there is more to animals than we know, if there is more to discover about their complexity and their sensitivity, then we must work to respect them, treat them kindly, and protect them. This goes for animals in the wild, who need us to preserve and restore habitat. It goes for animals on the street, victims of the pet overpopulation problem, and for birds in the trees, who suffer predation by the cats we might allow to roam outside. We can keep in mind the livestock and think of the animals that we put to work. We can respect the mystery of animals by the practice of kindness and mindfulness, by awareness of their life and advocacy for their needs.

And let us remember the mystery of our own species, the mystery of the human animals. Consider Oscar the cat's uncanny observation of a dying person. Something is happening in us that only a cat knows! Oscar knows us better in this respect than we know ourselves. There is more to us than we know. There is more to learn about ourselves and about one another. Let us keep learning, with humility, curiosity, and patience. May we stay open to new understandings of ourselves as individual human beings, and may we remember our place in the family of all beings. So may it be.

Blessing Ritual

Roger: Now is the time for a ritual of blessing for the animals and commitment for ourselves in relationship to the creatures of the world.

In a moment, the two of us will recite a blessing based on the words of Jean Howard. As we do, either seated or standing, place your hand on your animal gently. If you brought a picture of an animal, living or departed, you can hold that picture up. If you brought a stuffed animal, you can hold it up. Or call to mind the animals you wish to bless.

Lucy:

Animals live in our homes

They sleep on our window sills

Graze ... in our pastures

And follow us on quiet padded feet.

Roger: We provide them comforts of shelter, food and affection
And they offer us love and unconditional contentment.

Let us thank them for these precious gifts.

Let us praise Creation for these precious gifts.

And let us be reminded of our duty not only to our pets,

But also to their wild relatives...

Which pull nectar from large blossoms,

Lie in mud the color of chocolate

And wait for the flutter of wings or the silent movement of fins.

They also are dependent on us

To preserve their homes—

The forests, deserts and oceans—

Our common world of nature and ecology.

Let us go forth committing ourselves to acts of responsibility.

Let us go forth remembering our blessings. So may it be.

Some Introductions

We have a little time left to meet some of your animal companions.

If it would not be distressing to your pet or to others it might encounter on the way, please line up on this side, and come to the mike. Tell us your name, what breed or species your pet is, and its name. In any case, I hope you will stay around and meet one another in the meadow or on the patio after service.

Closing Hymn

“What Wondrous Love Is This” is an old, traditional hymn written to give thanks for divine love and care. But as I sang it this week, it made me think of the joy and comfort that come to us from all sources, including for some of us, from animal companions. So now rise as you are comfortable for #18. Please remain up for the benediction.

Benediction

For the benediction we invite you to take the hand or the leash on either side of you.

May you depart in peace, and return in joy. As you go into the world, may you find blessings from all kinds of sources and many reasons to give thanks. And may you find ways to bring blessings into the world, and into the lives of others, by the way you live your days.

Blessed be.

* “A Day in the Life of Oscar the Cat,” by David M. Dosa, M.D., M.P.H. New England Journal of Medicine, July 26, 2007, vol. 357, pp. 328-9.

<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp078108>