

10/3/2024

Dogs...

As we approach the feast day of St. Francis, I'm thinking of all those splendid creatures that God has made. Truly our world is filled with such a diversity, which speaks to the infinite creativity of our God. On my mind especially are those beloved pets with whom we share our lives. On Sunday afternoon, we'll gather for the blessing of the animals. Always a joyous event, and it is a wonderful thing to have an animal friend, isn't it? Though they come with some burdens, the blessings outweigh them. I've noticed in recent years that dogs have far outnumbered cats, or any other species for that matter, at the blessing of the animals.

That's not to say that we don't get a diversity of pets represented. I've blessed a great variety over the years, including horses, turtles, rabbits, sugar-gliders, hamsters, and not long ago a crested lizard. I don't think anyone has ever brought a boa constrictor, and I would shudder at tarantula (I have a fear of spiders), but I would bless it. But, mostly, we get dogs and some cats. I'm not going to take a position in the dogs vs. cats - which makes the better pet - debate. I've had both in my lifetime, and they are both fine companions. They bring joy and we marvel at their abilities. In recent years, I've had more dogs, and so I wanted to share a word about them and the one I have now.

Dog people will say that while cats live *with* you, dogs live *for* you. And there is something to that. Cat people would respond that cats are less dependent because they are more secure in their self-worth. Whatever the case, dogs are generally *very* happy to see you when you come home. And that adds a lot of joy to our days. It is good when someone is glad to see you at the end of a long day, isn't it? The comedian, Jim Gaffigan, quips that if you walked out of your house, and then realized you forgot your keys and went back for them, "your dog would greet you as if you had just returned from war! It's you! Where have you been? I've missed you so much!"

Recently, I saw an interview with Jane Goodall, the famous primatologist and anthropologist. She is considered the world's foremost expert on chimpanzees. But, surprisingly, it was revealed in the interview that chimps are not her favorite animal. What is her favorite animal? The dog! Asked why dogs, she replied because "they are the best example of unconditional love that we have." I don't know if I would go that far. I see that their love can sometimes be conditioned.

My own dog, Porthos, loves every dog he encounters, but he *really* loves people. When we arrive at the dog park, he makes his rounds greeting every single person. But I notice he gives extra special attention to the ones that give him treats. I've asked them not to give him treats, as the little guy has a sensitive stomach. But I see them sometimes (when they think I'm not looking), sneaking him treats! They just like him and like all his attention. So maybe love for all, but extra special love for some. Not exactly unconditional. Truly unconditional love is the kind of love that God alone gives us, and the kind of love we strive to emulate in our own relationships.

But dogs have taught me things over the years. I once had a brilliant, beautiful dog named, Napoleon. He was a chow chow and looked like a lion at the end of my leash. Ordinarily, that dog was very glad to see me when I arrived home. He would come bounding up, stand on his back legs, and almost hug me upon my return. Every once in a while though, he would approach slowly, his tail locked between his legs. He would be carrying one of his favorite toys in his teeth. He would lay it at my feet, and retreat backwards slowly. "Oh no," I would think, "Napoleon, what have you done?"

It was then that I see the remains of whatever he had destroyed. Something that he shouldn't have gotten into, but did, because the temptation was just too great. He knew it was wrong. He knew he shouldn't have done it, whatever it was that he had done. He knew his master would be displeased, maybe even angry. He couldn't make it right. What was done was done. What was destroyed could not be put back together, and he knew it.

He would bring that offering, his beloved toy, all he had to give. And he would lay it at my feet. His look said it all, "I know I've done something terrible. But please let me stay in your presence." It was one of the best examples of repentance that I've seen in the animal kingdom.

So, these creatures can teach us things, like how to say, "I'm sorry," for example. They can show us great love, even if it isn't maybe truly unconditional. They can show us great loyalty. And sometimes they display amazingly perceptive gentleness with those who need a little mercy in a moment.

Not long ago, I was on a long walk with Porthos. We came upon a couple who were clearly in the middle of heated argument. The wife sitting on a low wall, her hands in her lap, her face on the verge of tears. The husband pacing, embarrassed probably that someone has stumbled into their argument. I could have turned back, but our house was on the other side of them.

So, we walked on, acting oblivious to the scene. But Porthos went immediately to the wife and started licking her hand. She pet him, and he jumped up and kissed her face. As I pulled him toward me, I noticed the whole mood lightened, and I said, “sometimes all you need is a kiss from a dog.” She chuckled and agreed. I hope that couple has worked it out, whatever it was. Hopefully, they’ve engaged the help of a compassionate and caring therapist, to improve their communication. And maybe someday, they’ll get a dog to lighten the mood when they need it to be lightened.

What has having a companion animal taught you about love, life, friendship, or the amazing creativity of God?

As always, I welcome your feedback: frpatrick@scbythesea.org

Yours in Christ,
Fr. Patrick