

**Theodore Parker Church**

**Blessing the Other-than-Human/Listening to Other Songs**

**October 4, 2020**

Taking a small break from politics and other affairs of concern, we'll let St. Francis inspire us to remember that we are not alone on this human journey. This Sunday, we'll take the time to share with each other the creatures that keep us company, blessing the gift of their special presence in our lives. Bring your pics!!

**Opening Words - from Rumi (1207-1273) HEY**

**(I invite you to use your imagination to observe the elements of this poem)**

The grass beneath a tree is content  
and silent.

A squirrel holds an acorn in its praying hands,  
offering thanks, it looks like.

The nut tastes sweet; I bet the prayer  
spiced it up somehow.

The broken shells fall on the grass, and the grass looks up and says,  
“Hey.”

And the squirrel looks down and says,  
“Hey.”

I have been saying “Hey” lately too,  
to (whatever Holy thing is listening).

Formalities just weren't working.

So, hey - Welcome to worship,  
This place where formalities just aren't working.

**Intro to the service – the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

Our service today is a reminder that the circle of living we inhabit is vast and precious. In the ongoing drama of our human lives (which feels like it gets more and more dramatic by the day)

we need to pause and remember the other-than-human living things with whom we share this earth. Today we are reminded not only of our absolute love and gratitude for the blessing of these beings, but also of all those we too easily overlook: not just the pets, but the wild ones, the earthbound ones, the flying ones; the ones that swim or crawl or burrow; and, the world of nature that is brimming and vulnerable and beautiful and astonishing. So easily distracted by our human cares, it is good to take the time this morning to fill our hearts with awareness and gratitude for all those with whom we share this earth, finding hope and renewed commitment to their presence as much as our own. (adapted from First Church Providence, Liz Lerner 2019)

And so we begin with the trees . . . (**noodle music** with short tree slideshow)

## Story

**Sustaining the Tree of Life, adapted** By [Lynn Gardner](#)

The tree stood in the middle of the village. Its trunk was so large that it took six people holding hands to reach around it. The roots were strong and wide, and its branches spread out over the village square, offering shelter from the rain, or shade from the summer sun.

. . .

The people of the village loved the tree. It had been witness to so much (that) when the breezes blew through the leaves, one could hear echoes of generations: laughter, conversations, dreams, prayers, and songs.

Animals loved the tree, too. Rabbits lived in burrows under the roots, squirrels and monkeys lived in the branches, and bats and birds flew in to eat the abundant fruit. The tree seemed to buzz with life!

One day, a traveling merchant arrived in the village. He rested in the shade and ate two pieces of delicious fruit. **“This fruit is incredible,” he said. “I would like to have some to sell in the next villages that I visit. Who owns this tree?”**

*“No one owns this tree,”* replied a villager. *“If anything, we belong to it.”*

**“Well, then, if no one owns the tree, then no one will mind if I pick the fruit!”** said the merchant, and began to fill a basket.

*“I mind,”* said the villager, *“and today I am the keeper of the tree.”*

**“What do you mean, keeper of the tree?”**

*“We each take our turn being here with the tree. We could never own it. We are here as protectors, as sustainers.”*

**“That’s ridiculous. This tree doesn’t need you! You could just take what you need; take what you want. The tree will continue.”**

But the villager couldn’t be persuaded. *“Sir, this tree isn’t like that. We don’t come here to take from it...even though we receive much. We are keepers of the tree because this is where we are nourished. This is where some of our most precious memories are, and where our people have dreamed. This is where we remember who we want to become.”*

**“Well,”** said the merchant, **“you may think this tree is very special, but it still doesn’t need you to sit with it. That is preposterous!”**

*“Ah,”* replied the villager. *“The tree itself may not need me—but what of others who come by? Just this morning I sat with a woman whose heart was heavy with worry. Had I not been here, she would have had to carry that weight alone. And this afternoon, a tired couple came by, and they rested with me. They said they had been looking for a place like this. And then an elder came by, and we watched the birds in the branches together.*

*“And now you are here. You were confused about what this tree is, and how to be with it. Imagine if you had arrived and not found anyone here to talk with? You might have continued thinking that everything you do is all about you. Lucky for you, my friend, I’m here to let you know that when you care for the tree of life, it becomes about so much more than just you.”*

The merchant sat for a while in the shade, thinking about these ideas that felt new and a little challenging. As the sun went down, he picked up his bag and headed out of town, whistling a song that he hadn’t thought of in years. On his way, he shared a smile with each person he met, his heart feeling strangely light and joyful.

And the people of the village? They continued to sustain the tree of life: to care for one another and to share their gifts, with grace and gratitude. May it be so for each of us.

**Intro to Reading:** Even as we are reminded of the gift of growing things around us, we honor, this morning, the animals who companion us, and all creatures that have so much to teach us if we are willing to listen, to share this time of ours knowing we are all in it together. They bless us with their wisdom, when - like listening to the trees - we are smart enough to pay attention!

**Reading      To Learn from Animal Being** John O'Donohue

Nearer to the earth's heart,  
Deeper within its silence:  
Animals know this world  
In a way we never will.

We who are ever  
Distanced and distracted  
By the parade of bright  
Windows thought opens:  
Their seamless presence  
Is not fractured thus.  
Stranded between time  
Gone and time emerging,  
We manage seldom  
To be where we are:  
Whereas they are always  
Looking out from  
The here and now.

May we learn to return  
And rest in the beauty  
Of animal being,  
Learn to lean low,  
Leave our locked minds,  
And with freed senses  
Feel the earth  
Breathing with us.

May we enter  
Into lightness of spirit,  
And slip frequently into  
The feel of the wild.  
Let the clear silence  
Of our animal being  
Cleanse our hearts

Of corrosive words.

May we learn to walk  
Upon the earth  
With all their confidence  
And clear-eyed stillness  
So that our minds  
Might be baptized  
In the name of the wind  
And the light and the rain.

### **Meditation**

Often in our quiet times, we seek to raise voices from the margins - those among us with not enough access to the centers of power and authority. Let us be listening today for the voices even further out - the ones with language we often fail to consider, those who trust us to honor their place in this world - the growing things that need our care more than our consumption; the ones that look to us for patience and compassion even as they return to us again and again in our worst hours. Let us be inspired by their presence and grace and love, as we sit quietly together for some time.

### **Homily      Listening to Other Songs      the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

I don't know about you, but truth be told, I'm a little tired of us. (not US - but humanity . . . our foibles, our egos, our neediness.) Maybe Francis was, too. Maybe that's why he spent so much time with animals and trees and things of the earth other than people because sometimes, maybe often, they sing more interesting songs, sweeter songs, not such self-absorbed songs.

I don't want to oversimplify nature - we all know it can be just as fierce and unpleasant as human nature can be, but at its best the other-than-human life around us can be so amazing, and so lovely and so awe-inspiring - whether we hear it through the branches of our favorite tree or in the wind, or in the gentle purr of our feline friends, or the dancing invitation to yet another walk around the block.

E.B. White apparently wrote of his difficult dog, Fred, "life without him would be heaven, but I'm afraid it's not what I want." No - despite the care they require, it's not what we would want - a world with nothing but our own creations? Oh, no. How dull.

October is the month for Deep Listening and I am very grateful it coincides with the celebration of St. Francis, and his encouragement to listen to the many other songs that surround us. It's not that we would ignore our own voices altogether; only that we might be reminded to include a much broader offering.

Francis wasn't born Francis, of course, and he wasn't born poor. His given name was Giovanni, but his father started calling him Francesco as a child, and it stuck. They were merchants, and wealthy - and it took Francis some time to decide to dedicate his life to simplicity and reverence, to cast off the binds of financial wealth in favor of spiritual riches. So many stories grew after his death, of course, though he is known to have believed that nature, itself, is the mirror of God. That, in itself, is a message worth remembering.

Earlier in the week, Rose reminded me of a story about Theodore Parker that's in the UUA Tapestry of Faith teaching materials. The story describes a day when young Theodore is walking home, casually swinging a stick, and comes across a turtle. He's tempted to give it a good whack or two, as he has seen other children do - but somehow determines that's not a good idea - that the turtle has done him no harm, so he should do no harm in return. He relates the experience to his mother, who - in this story anyway - suggests that Teddy's conscience was informing his decision and that he should always listen to that inner voice . . . and I'm thinking maybe it was the turtle screaming out loudly enough to finally be heard! Put that stick down, you little bum! I may not be big, but I am a part of the whole and your job is to respect that!

These are strange times, indeed, my friends. Let's be grateful for the simple reminder to step outside our own cares and be aware of a bigger reality - one that sings to us if we would only listen to its deep and lasting assurance, one that blesses our lives as surely as we could be blessings in return. There is more to this world than us; let's take care of it - care of the trees, and all the creatures that share our days. If only for a time or two each week, or maybe each and every day for much of it, let's tune out the cacophony of our own noise and remember beyond ourselves.

Thank you, Francis. Thank you, trees. Thank you dogs and cats and birds and yes, all creatures of the earth and sky.

Amen.

**Closing Words**      The Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master,

Grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

**Postlude fugue 10 e minor**

**After breakout groups . . . Lui Collins' Blessed**