

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 21A- Margaret Schultz 10.1.23

St. Francis Day Sermon 2023

One of the most famous stories about St. Francis is how he tamed a wolf who was trying to eat some villagers and their children. Francis was intrigued by this solitary wolf living so close to a village because wolves run in packs and avoid human contact whenever possible. Francis realized that the wolf was hungry and only chasing the villagers because they were slower than his normal prey and might have a chance for a meal. The blessed Francis solved the problem by turning the wolf into a vegetarian. And it is this last bit of the story that has convinced modern day citified scholars to write off the wolf story as legend.

I'm sure that this last bit is mythical because no carnivore can survive on a vegetarian diet. So why did Francis not run away in fear like the villagers? I suspect its because he looked at the wolf with compassion and no doubt realized that he was hungry but too old or arthritic to hunt his regular wild prey with his pack.

To solve the situation Francis no doubt asked the villagers to feed the wolf some gruel with some meat in it rather like the kibble we feed our dogs today.

It is these stories of Francis's encounter with animals that are so endearing to us today because they show how he treated animals and humans a like with compassion and justice. Would it surprise you to find out that there are some modern St. Francis's today?

The ones I am going to talk about are the employees and volunteers that work at the New England and Seattle Aquariums.

They had a real problem with the octupuses, the cleverest of their aquatic denizens. They would sneak out of their tanks either to steal someone else's food in an adjoining tank or sneak out through the pumps and go exploring through the aquarium. This was risky behavior because an octopus can only stay out of water for 20 minutes and while they can get out of the tanks easily they can't get back in them. So what to do?

It was decided that the octopuses engaged in this risky behavior because they were bored. So they gave them puzzles. This worked for a while until they got so good at putting them together and taking them apart that they got bored and started escaping again.

This time the aquarium staff began sticking their arms into the tanks so stimulate them. The octopuses would then wrap a tentacle around the arm presenting itself. Why because they could smell the humans through their suckers and get to know them.

The only problem with this was explaining to your friends about all the hickies up and down on your arms. These were enriching experiences for the octopuses and humans alike.

Friendships developed. Now, not all octopuses like all humans and vice versa. They all had their favorites since octopuses can easily distinguish one human from another. Alas octopuses only live 4 years and when one dies there is a lot of weeping among the staff and volunteers.

There is one story I found particularly touching about the octopus, Athena. She had turned very pale so her human knew that she was dying, so he tossed a fish to her to bolster her spirits. She ignored the fish and wrapped her tentacle around his arm and clung to it as she died.

It all began with Miriam. The most feared residents in the aquarium were the Anacondas because they can easily strangle a human to death. Naturally they were handled very carefully with snake poles keeping the snakes as far away from the handlers as possible. Well one day an employee passed the Anaconda tank and found the Anaconda resting his head against Miriam's chest and the rest of him wrapped around her feet. Miriam discovered two things that would be important to handling them. One, they did not like to be grabbed by the back of their heads and two, they had distinctive stripes on their heads so you could tell them apart. This would be useful to make sure veterinarians were medicating the right snake.

And then there was a second Miriam who replaced the first one when she had to have surgery.

The staff discovered Miriam #2 dressed in a wet suit

helping another Anaconda give birth. Anacondas birth their young through their skin. The youngsters didn't much care for Miriam but she won them over as well.

All, these modern day St. Francis's did what he did treating animals and humans alike with justice and compassion, overlooking their differences in appearance and overcoming their fear of them.

Fear is a terrible thing and it is tearing our society apart. So let us learn a final lesson from the octopus. If he senses a predator he changes color to blend in with his surroundings. If he sees a crevice he will climb in and pull a rock or shell after him to use as a door. If he is really terrified, he inks his predator. The only problem is the ink is so poisonous that it will not just kill the predator but kill the octopus as well.

So let us remember that fear kills and compassion and justice protects all life. And this is why Jesus told us to "fear not".