Congregational Church of La Jolla, UCC
Rev. Tim Seery
October 25, 2026

Blessing of the Animals

Would you join me in prayer? God of All Things Who Live and Breathe and Move: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Every year we hold Blessing of the Animals Sunday and for me it means a lot personally because even though most of you weren't here back then, almost a decade ago, it was this Sunday that was my very first Sunday with you. It was October 15, 2017. In other words, my first act as a fully credentialed clergy person was to bless animals. Quite honestly, it felt perfect, it felt like a very Southern California tradition, especially in this city where pets are welcome most everywhere. I remember that on October 15, 2017 we were in the midst of a heat wave, it was something like 90 degrees that day, and I made the very risky decision to show up to a church of people, most of whom I didn't know, wearing shorts. And I know that back then, that was a shock to some, but it was such a fitting introduction to who I am and I'm grateful you decided to keep me around all these years later.

For as local of a tradition as animal blessing feels, it is actually an ancient church tradition. It was a thing way back in the 3rd and 4th centuries for folks every year to bring their working livestock and their cattle to priests for a blessing. The reason made sense, these animals were core to their survival, the people lived close to the soil and to nature. They recognized that they couldn't do it alone—that their animals were a key part of their wellbeing.

The reason we do this in October is because on October 4, the church celebrates the Feast Day of St. Francis—for whom animals and all of Creation were fundamental to his understanding of faith. October 4 was the day that St. Francis died. What is unique about this year, 2026, is that it marks the 800th year since that day back in 1226. The story goes that St. Francis, only 44 years old was racked with pain, nearly blind, so feeble he couldn't really walk, he asked his friends to carry him home—and by home we aren't talking about his family home or some beautiful house, he lived in this little stone church in Assisi and it was at that same dwelling the he had opened a hospital for lepers. It was said that the moment he died a bouquet of red roses just sprung up instantaneously on the spot. And so today if you go to Assisi to this place they keep red roses there 364 days a year.

Every year I tell a little about the story of St. Francis—he came from incredible privilege. His family were leaders is the emerging mercantile word in Europe. They were beyond wealthy. St. Francis knew how to spend money, but over time he realized that the was an empty place inside himself and that just never could be filled—that he was continually filling it with all the wrong things. And so he started to study the life of Jesus and he noticed things like Jesus didn't really own stuff, Jesus did't have a home, so he thought, that might be the way for me. His idea was that he was going to see what Jesus did and then follow that as closely as he could. So he started to hang out with lepers, he started to visit the parts of town that no one wanted to visit and he realized that all of this exotic, expensive stuff was just not doing it for him anymore. And so he gave all that up, adopted a very modest life, wore a brown tunic, and he started to give his stuff away, and he got so zealous in that that he started to give his father's stuff away as well. Well, his father took exception to this and sued him and it's said they never spoke again. When he would pass Francis on the street he'd avert his gaze and spit on the walkway and keep going. But Francis didn't care. He wanted to be like Jesus, to be close to Jesus. Love you enemies, Francis thought he should try that, touch the untouchable people, he did that. Take nothing for your journey, Jesus said, and so Francis. didn't take anything with him.

And the thing that emerged from this was this incredible connection to the earth. He would refer to nature almost as if it was human, he'd call it brother and sister, he'd refer to the sun as brother sun, or the moon

as sister moon, he adored everything. He would preach and pray with birds and the wind and the hillside. He called all of those things brother and sister. He would't step on a bug, because God made that bug. He treasured all of the things that God created. Of course, he didn't know the science that we do today but he had such a deep appreciation for all of it. All of creation. For the ways he saw it all connected.

You might think about it in terms of something that someone made that you treasure, that the rest of the world might think of as garbage, but to you it's sacred, a family heirloom, or something someone gifted you long ago—that you cherish. Francis looked at every person and every thing in creation as if it was like this, as if it was an heirloom, as if it was some beautiful handiwork of God to be treasured.

One of our tradition's contemporary saints is of course Ralph Waldo Emerson—one of our readings this morning is a poem that he wrote, very much in the vein of St. Francis. About a mountain and a squirrel having an argument and the squirrel realizing that while very different each of them have a unique and important role, with different talents and purposes. So very transcendental, so very Franciscan.

St. Francis is thought of as the patron saint of peace. And rightfully so. St. Francis lived during the time of the crusades in the Middle East. And there's a story about how he asked to accompany some of the soldiers to Damietta in Egypt for one of the biggest battles. They thought this kind of odd, but they took him with them anyway. And when they got there he discovered this situation on the battlefield where the Christians were in their armor, wearing helmets, ready for battle, and the Muslims across on the other side were rattling their sabers shouting in Arabic. And when it was time for battle to begin, St. Francis says to them that he wants to start it. So he steps out and goes out into no-mans land unarmed, barefooted, looking so pitiful. And the other side almost attacks him but he looked so strange they thought of him as more of a curiosity and so he walked all the way to the other side where it is said he just talked to them, listened to them and spent a total of 4 days with them in Damietta. And at the end of the 4 days the Christians pulled back their forces and went home. St. Francis made a peace that people thought was impossible.

This is what we celebrate today. A peace that people thought was impossible—a love for creation that sees animals and nature as brother and sister with us. The animals who are a part of our journey that teaches us about selflessness, and love, and loss, and grief and companionship. All of those big things which such small things, small creatures, can teach us. And that is what we bless. And I think alongside that there is part of us that that loves the wildness of it all—that reminds us that God loves that which is wild and untamed, even the untamed parts of ourselves that we might feel are sometimes less than desirable or that need fixing—that God loves all of those things, those tangly, jagged parts of ourselves, that we today bless and love those parts of ourselves just the same.

There's a poem that Jan Richardson wrote specifically for Blessing of the Animals where she says,

Bless them
who curl themselves
around our hearts,
who twine themselves
through our days,
who companion us
in our labor,
who call us
to come and play.

Bless them
who will never be
entirely tamed
and so remind us
that you love

what is wild,
that you rejoice
in what lives close
to the earth,
that your heart beats
in the heart of these creatures

So let us bless them who will never be entirely tamed, our animals or our own very selves—for in them and in us, God's heart also beats.

Amen.