

“A Place for Everyone”

A Homily by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Advent Blessing of the Animals
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
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A place for everyone, that's what we promise when we welcome anyone into a Unitarian Universalist space. Take this Meeting House, for example. This afternoon, it's a place of meeting for all kinds of creatures who don't usually show up; they need an invitation, and this is it. Dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, humans, whoever you are, whatever you are, welcome!

It's like those words printed at the top of our order of service:

“Welcome all creeds. All breeds. No dogmas allowed.”

Dogs, yes; dogmas, no.

Can you imagine a meeting house where dogs are always the guests of honor? There is such a place in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. It's called the Dog Chapel. If you ever visit it and then look up, you'll see a steeple topped with a golden lab with wings – that's right it's a golden lab angel soaring heavenward! If you decide to enter this chapel, you might want a dog to accompany you, maybe even to escort you, because there are three doors – one on either side for humans to go through, and a small flapping door in the center for – of course, for dogs. After all, dogs are the guests of honor. Each of the pews inside is framed at its end with a wooden dog sculpture – kind of like silent dogs, sitting there, keeping watch over whomever or whatever climbs onto the pews. The altar is a nice cozy rug, where your best four-legged friend can curl up and take a nap or pay attention to whatever dog-friendly music might be playing. It's not really so different from what people sometimes do in church: some pay attention, and some take a nap.

On either side of the stained glass window arching over the altar/rug is a framed portrait of ... you guessed it, a dog. The caption under one portrait says simply: “Devotion” and under the other, “Dogs have a soul.” Purebreds and mutts are all welcome – kind of like in a Unitarian Universalist congregation of humans. Some of us are lifelong UUs; others come with an assortment of religious backgrounds. Together we're a bunch of religious mutts!

And the stained glass windows letting the light in? Well, you can imagine what the images might be, though they shed light, not hair. The floor of course is a warm friendly wood – no carpeting!

The creator of this dog chapel happened to be a human who had a dream. There was actually a bit more to it. A long time ago Stephen Huneck had an accident, a terrible fall, and quickly developed a quite serious illness that affected his breathing. He went into a coma for two whole months – the kind of sleep where you're alive, but you don't wake up for a long long time. He wasn't given much hope, but his wife and his children and his dogs never gave up hope. Then suddenly he woke up and he began to heal, but he woke up with the memory of a dream he had during his coma.

Stephen had dreamt that he woke up and started walking around the hospital grounds until he came upon an old white wooden building that was rather small. He stepped inside and

discovered a sculpture that seemed ancient. It looked a bit like a totem pole, with assorted sculptures piled one on top of the other. Making up this pole sculpture were the likenesses of all kinds of animals, some fighting with each other, some loving each other, some giving birth to new life. Suddenly he felt the presence of someone else in the room. It was a man with a dog's head. Stephen told him he would give everything he owned for this sculpture. The man-dog replied that he would like him to have it, because he, Stephen, would appreciate it as much as he had. Stephen wrote him a check for \$43,000, his life savings.

When he awoke from his coma, Stephen was convinced that this had happened and tried to tell his wife about his purchase. (who may have had some second thoughts about his waking up.) Slowly he realized that it was a dream, but he held onto the dream as his family, two-legged and four-legged, nursed him back to health.

One day he had a daydream. He came out of this dream determined to build a chapel, a chapel that "would celebrate the spiritual bond we have with our dogs." It would be open to dogs of all kinds – probably even a few cats who wouldn't put up with being left outside, along with a few humans who couldn't stand to be excluded either. Everyone would be welcome. From his daydream, inspired by his coma dream, Stephen built the Dog Chapel.

I've already told you a few things about the chapel, but perhaps most important are the messages on the stained glass windows lining the interior side walls. Each is a lesson his dogs had taught him about love and joy, friendship and play, trust and faith and peace.

Love, for example. Stephen learned that:

"Dogs can heel ...
Dogs can even heal a broken heart.
Do you ever wonder," he asks,
"if God created the dog for the child or the child for the dog?
A home without a dog is merely a shelter," he concludes.

Maybe we could stretch this lesson to include cats at least, though I don't know any cat who would heel!

And play. How about play?

"Dogs love to play.
They can amuse themselves for hours"
[with that missing sock perhaps!]
"If you feel you are too old to play,
Buy a ball and a dog to go with it."

And trust. How about trust?

"You can trust a dog with your life ...
But not with your lunch.
Dogs are trusting but not stupid."

[This saying goes along with a dog watching a human parachute just for the fun of it! The dog decides not to have this kind of fun!]

So let's be good to our non-human friends as well as our human friends. Let's show to each other and to them that we've learned a few things about love and play and trust from them.

I forgot to mention that I learned about the Dog Chapel in a book by that name, a book that was a Mother's Day gift from one of my daughters. Inside the cover, Sarah wrote:

"Mom,

*Here's a little inspiration about seeing religion from a whole new perspective.
Maybe four-legged creatures have some insight to contribute to universal truths.*

Love, Sarah"

Sarah and her partner, Robb, have a dog named Ella, by the way. I believe Ella and all our dogs and cats and more assembled here today have a lot to contribute to universal truths. What do you think?

Source:

Stephen Huneck, *The Dog Chapel*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 2002.