

Unlikely Animal Friendships

Homily by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

October 22, 2023

We who are gathered here today are all animal lovers—why else would we be here? I see in your eyes and smiles how much you love and appreciate your animals, those animals who are with us and those who have passed on. It moves me. We are all made better by witnessing and feeling such love.

Animals are our friends, our companions, our keepers of secrets, our playmates, and lovers of life. Animals comfort us in times of sorrow and cheer us up, even when we don't know we need it. For many of us they are integral to our life. Our lives wouldn't be the same without them.

This is true not only for cats and dogs, mice, and guinea pigs. It is true for chickens, birds, and reptiles. It is true for deer we spot at dusk or dawn. Our lives wouldn't be the same without our feathered friends that we watch fly, nest, and feed. Our lives are enriched by the sacred times we see wild moose, bear, or coyotes. All of these and more are our friends. They all enrich our existence, on so many levels, including the biosphere.

As we approach this year noticing and honoring the interconnected web of life of we are only a part, we begin to recognize too that there are other perspectives than ours alone. We realize that animals relate to their environment. Trees communicate with each other. The moon interacts with the sea.

It's not all about us.

It's about the entirety of life, death, and rebirth.

It's about the whole of relationships—between us and others, between them and us—and between them and them.

Let's take animals as one example. Animals have relationships with each other that have nothing to do with us! They are predators and prey; think of the leopards and the antelope. There are symbiotic relationships which can be parasitic such as with barnacles and swimming crabs. There are symbiotic relationships which are mutually beneficial such as oxpeckers and zebras.

And then there are animal friends. We often think of two dogs, even dogs and cats, and certainly newborn lion cubs. However, it doesn't end there. There are many other unlikely animal friendships, some of which are also common, sometimes inexplicable.

On the cover of your Order of Service, you will see pictures of four of these unlikely friendships. Starting with the upper left, we have Dillie, the coffee-drinking, bed-hogging "house deer," licking Lady, the black poodle. This unlikely couple lives with a veterinarian who rescued Dillie, the blind deer. As a young fawn she was found abandoned, unable to stand, and sick. Lady, the resident poodle immediately took to Dillie and began licking her, caring for her, and providing warmth for the fawn as she slept. They were lifelong fast friends.

Then we have Lucky, the cat, and Coco, the cockatoo, who live with their human family in Georgia. Though generally predators and prey, they love each other. Coco licks the inside of Lucky's ear which prompts the kitty to roll over and have a belly rub by the bird's feet.

Then we have the one-month-old orangutan babies and tiger cubs in the Taman Safari Zoo who shared a nursery together. Without parents, the two orangutans and two tigers play all day together. Normally the orangutans are prey to tigers. They say it "would only happen in the zoo." I say, who knows?

One more example of unlikely animal friendships, as told in the *Unlikely Friendships*¹ book, are Muchi, the stray cat, and Mausschen, the bear. This duo were the best of friends whose friendship lasted for a decade until the bear died at the old age of forty-three. The beautiful thing is that no one knows where the cat came from. It showed up in the bear's enclosure and could come and go as it wanted. It would leave but always came back. They were quite inseparable.

These are just a few examples. Their stories are

1 Jennifer Holland, *Unlikely Friendships* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2011).

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inspirational, and looking at their photographs can't help but calm you and make you smile.

You've probably known a few unlikely animal friendships. At the horse and mule sanctuary, we had a mule and a donkey who were rescued together. The donkey most often stood under the horse. I rarely saw them more than a few feet apart. They could only be adopted as a pair, and they were!

In my family, we had a gecko named Michael and a dog named Niña Bonita. For years, they cohabitated just fine. They were aware of each other, but neither of them paid much attention to the other.

Then we moved here. Both were elderly at that point and a move was a big deal. The day the movers were unloading things into our new home, I found our beloved dog, Niña Bonita, sitting faithfully next to Michael's terrarium on the floor, as if to say, "I don't know what's going on here, but I've got you." Niña's most common resting place was near Michael's cage until her death three years later.

We may never know exactly what animals are thinking or communicating with one another. But we know they are, and we know they have their own relationships, independent of us.

It is a gift when we get to see such friendships. Pay attention and when you notice them, stop, watch, listen, and say thank you.

Amen.