

SHAGGY DOG

A HOMILY PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH ON THE
OBSERVANCE OF SAINT FRANCIS DAY,
AND THE ANNUAL BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS

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Appointed Texts for Saint Francis Day:

The First Lesson: Job 12:7-10

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? 1 In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

The Gospel: Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."



"But ask the animals, and they will teach you."

As most of you know (because it's one of my standard opening lines), I grew up in a small Midwest town. But I wasn't born there. Rather, we moved to Kalamazoo from Joliet when I was four, along with my father, mother, older brother and sister, and Midnight.

Now, Midnight was a mutt we'd inherited from someone we never really knew. One evening, after supper, with the neighborhood kids playing in front of our house, I still remember the old car pulling up alongside the curb briefly, as a haggard old woman screeched out the window "Here kids, wanna dog?" and tossed out a black puppy. Even at a young and tender age I was introduced to the overpopulation pet problem.

Thing is, the mutt turned out to be a genius; especially its sense of direction. We soon realized he could have found his way back to where he'd come if he wanted; but even as a mere pup, I think he knew he'd had as much of that old witch as she'd had of him. He was looking for a better life, and not looking back. So the day we moved to Kalamazoo – a good 150 miles away – my parents piled the dog and the kids in the back seat, swung the car into high gear and headed east.

Behind the wheel of a car, my father had that flawed combination a lead foot, a poor sense of direction and too much pride to ask anyone. Ask any human being that is. So when he exclaimed something like, "Where in all of God's creation is that blasted highway," can you believe Midnight barked a few orders, and – lo and behold – we soon found ourselves on the road to our future life.

Can you believe it? Or, is that what you might call a shaggy dog story?

Thing is, soon after we arrived in Kazoo, Midnight got distemper; and, like our own family version of *Old Yeller*, the day I saw that dog uncharacteristically turn and snarl at my mother, I knew it's days were numbered.

So in the Winter of '52, before Christmas, we skidded out on a wintry day to a little house off Portage Road near the Kalamazoo Airport, just past a diner called "The Igloo" (well, because it was shaped like a dingy old white igloo); and there in the basement of that house we picked out the saddest of the bunch from a litter of beagle pups. It looked so sad, in fact, I named it Happy. His official AKC name was Happy Boy VIII.

As you may know, hounds are runners and hunters. Nose to the ground, tail in the air, and they're gone. Back in the days when there were no leash laws it wasn't a problem. In fact, it helped. Happy was smart enough to know things weren't easy for a family of five on a poor preacher's salary. So he'd hunt a lot, and would quite often bring home supper. Rabbit mostly.

He'd not only bring it home, but prepare it for us all, as well. It was just amazing how many different dishes that dog came up with for us all to enjoy. There was braised rabbit, roasted rabbit with potatoes *au-gratin*, rabbit kabob, rabbit *l'orange*, rabbit sausage w/ mashed potatoes, and my favorite in winter – good old rabbit stew.

Can you believe that? Or, is that what you'd call a shaggy dog story?

Happy Boy lived to be 91 in human years. I was off at boarding school and almost finishing up my high school years when his kidneys gave out, and he was put down. My folks buried him in a corner of the garden at our house on Blackberry Hill, overlooking a duck pond in the southwest part of the city.

In fact, it was that duck pond where Punch used to love to spend his days. He was an English setter; and perhaps the antidote to the empty nest syndrome. He was named Punch, because he was dingy as all get out. Or so it seemed. Being a bird dog he'd spend all his days trying to actually catch one of those ducks in that pond. He'd swim for hours after them; and, when they'd finally take wing and circle overhead, he'd continue paddling in circles below in the water.

We thought he was just dumb. But actually, only later, did we discover that the pond was actually not only a habitat preserve, but also a fitness training center for fowl; and Punch was their coach! All summer long, he'd push them, goad them, bark at them; knowing he was doing all he could to strengthen their wings for their southerly migration come fall.

Do you believe that? Or, is that also what you might call a ... shaggy dog story?

When I married young in college, my first wife had grown up with boxers, so we got one. It was our only child by that marriage. We named her Gloria. Gloria in excelsis deo, to be exact. Not much more to say about that one.

But when my own two daughters were seven and three we decided it was time to get our children a dog. We considered a lot of breeds and would peruse the pups-for-sale classifieds; like the old line, "Eats anything, loves small children." But since we didn't want to feed our offspring to the dog, we chose a breed that simply loves children. Betsy, the golden retriever was primarily Michal Anna's dog. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, we had had her nearly fifteen years. In fact, this afternoon we'll inter her ashes beneath the cherry tree in the back yard, beside the children's play-house.

Now retrievers, they say, aren't called retrievers for nothing. The one we have now I call my one-trick pony. No matter how many times you throw the ball for Annie, she's always willing to retrieve it one more than the number of times you throw it. But it wasn't so with Betsy. She's was always too smart. She knew if she retrieved the ball for you, you would only throw it again; then she'd have to get up and go get it all over again; and we wouldn't stop until she said enough was enough.

In fact, Betsy got so wise in her later years, we decided to send her off to college, and take Michal Anna with her; so that with Betsy there to help tutor Michal in her animal science major, my daughter could be assured of getting a good education. So Betsy got her through her first three years at UC Davis. Michal's on her own now.

Now we have Annie, another golden. Originally, she was supposed to be Emily's dog. But she's the only child left at home now; and – truth be told – she's the smartest of 'em all. Pets and kids. She's about thirty in human years, but still lives at home. She has her own career. She retrieves. In fact the license plate frame on her Bronco says it all: "Born to Run. Born to Fetch."

Annie shares her room in our home with the refrigerator, the stove, and the kitchen sink. She'd like her own room. In fact, each night she makes this decision all over again, and tries to get out. She quickly learned how lever knobs work on doors. Then she became adept at pushing chairs out of the way that were wedged in front of the door each night. She's so smart, in fact, can believe if I don't lock up my tools, she'll take my cordless drill and removes the hinges right off the door?

Now, that's a shaggy dog story ...

In today's gospel passage from Matthew, Jesus offers a prayer of thanks for the way God the Father-Creator came up with the idea of hiding certain things from the wise and intelligent, and bestowing them instead on the simple, the lowly and humble; the ones who don't make more out of themselves than they are, or ought.

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I don't know if Mary and Joseph ever got Jesus and his brother James a pet when they were boys; or the kinds of shaggy dog stories Jesus may have come up with. Some folks believe a lot of the stories about Jesus himself are actually a bit of a stretch of the imagination. But as a young Jew there must have been something of the tradition he learned, as reflected in the passage from Job, which we also read today; about asking the animals to teach us such wise and simple truths; like the Lord's hand, which is "in the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being."

Much of the teachings attributed to Jesus in our New Testament, Jesus himself passed along from a whole body of such Wisdom literature. (*Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, etc.*). But you know the teaching about loving your enemies too, and not just your friends? Or the one about an eager readiness to forgive over, and over, and over again? Or the one about finding true joy and greatest meaning and satisfaction in life by living for someone or something other than yourself? And the one about being more than merely true to yourself; about being true and faithful to God? Those teachings Jesus taught on his own all make me wonder if Jesus as a young boy growing up in Nazareth didn't have a dog to teach him.

"Thank you, Father," Jesus prays, "because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to the simple." His prayer then becomes then an invitation to do likewise: "Come to me, weary and heavy-laden, and find rest." Rest from what? And what of the yoke? The collar and leash? "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart, and – doing so – you will find rest for your souls."

We know something of the life Jesus lives. We know the life he lives and dies. We've all learned something from him, and the yoke of the gospel story. With all the wisdom and might, simplicity and humility we can muster, we're left to decide what to believe, or not to believe. What's just a shaggy dog; and what is truly the Lord's hand "in the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being."

Amen.