

September 28, 2008 (9 a.m.)

**The Feast of St. Francis – Blessing of the Animals**

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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The first night I brought her home to my third-floor walkup apartment, it hadn't occurred to me that an adult dog might not know how to walk up a flight of stairs.

I had been warned that retired racing greyhounds often lacked the skills of regular adult dogs; they are, after all, trained to run in circles and not cause trouble. That's all, nothing more. But stairs hadn't occurred to me. And so I carried her. All 60 pounds of her. After we walked inside, she crawled wearily into her new crate, bypassing her new toys and food bowls and slept all night.

Out of necessity, Gennie the greyhound learned steps quickly. Other things, though, she learned a lot more slowly. I taught her how to play, for example. I threw ball after ball while she looked at me with disdain. It wasn't until my mother had the idea to give her a stuffed animal that looked remarkably like a racetrack rabbit that she discovered the joy of squeaky toys. Revenge, at last!

Gennie taught me a lot, too. Patience is beyond virtue in February in Connecticut when your dog is looking for just the exact right lump of snow upon which to relieve herself. She taught me proper feeding and handling of another being but also about faithfulness and relaxation and unbridled enthusiasm over the simplicity of an empty peanut butter jar.

I believe, and I think St. Francis did, too, just as God's face is shown in each person that enters our lives to love us and challenge us, God's nature is shown in those things with fur and with gills, with wet noses and pointy ears, with squeaks, yaps, glubs and purrs.

Neither of my dogs ever helped me mow the lawn, taken me out for dinner or written "I adore you" on the floor in dog chow. In those human ways that we look for signs of love, dogs are deficient.

But you animal lovers here gathered know as well as I do that signs of love in our pets are much simpler and easier to discern if we only pay attention:

the wet nose in the hand, the excited laps around the bowl, the swish of the tail that says, “Mine! My beloved, you’re here and I love you!”

There is God in what our pets teach us: Responsibility for other beings, patience (both ours and theirs!), they teach us to forgive ourselves and how to love selflessly.

These are hard lessons to learn, but they are made easier by these goofy and gentle and crazy beings that we bring into our lives, those who, unlike other humans, depend on us unconditionally for their whole lives, do not judge, do not talk back and do not EVER give us a reason not to be anything but faithful and loving towards them.

The same can be said of God, who waits for us patiently, hoping we’ll hear when called by name: “Mine, my beloved, I love you.”

As far as I know, St. Francis never wrote about whether animals possess souls, only that they deserve care and protection as we all do. It is a heated debate in many churches, as if large brains and opposable thumbs give us alone the right to paradise.

When I held Gennie’s head as she fell asleep for the last time three weeks ago, there was no doubt in my mind that I will see her again with others I love in that place where there is not pain or grief but life everlasting. Because God, like Gennie, is trustworthy and true and loves me just that much.