Matthew 11:28-30: '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.'

Facebook reminds me daily that I am in a particular phase of my life, a time when my friends and I are finding our careers, settling down, starting families.

My friends who have children post pictures of their babies. And then there are my friends who are like me. We don't have children and instead post pictures of our pets. I get regular updates on Marmalade the Cat, Oliver the Dog, and many other animals I have come to know through the lives of my friends. They, in turn, have seen and heard about every funny, irritating, adorable thing my dog has ever done.

As an animal lover, I am intrigued by St. Francis and his approach to sharing the love of God with all creatures, especially given his privileged upbringing. He grew up wealthy and as a young man, served in the military. After a tour of duty, he spent some time working with the poor and then felt called to a life of poverty/faith, even to the chagrin of his family. His primary message was the inherent goodness of all things (people and animals alike), and he believed the

whole of creation should sing praises to God unceasingly...not unlike our Psalmist in today's reading. Did you know that there are more species of beetle than any other animal? There are more than 1.4 million individual species of beetle. One of my professors likes to say that if you ever wonder about God's joy in creation, look no further than God's deep affinity for beetles. It is no secret that God delights in the goodness of the created world; Genesis teaches us that. So it is only right that creation should sing forth praise in response.

There is a story I love of St. Francis preaching to a flock of birds. He walked into their midst and asked to stay awhile. He began to preach God's radical, unconditional love for them. The story goes, as he preached, they began to stretch their necks, to lift their beaks, to ruffle and straighten their feathers, to praise God in their own bird-like way, warbling and trilling. St. Francis walked through them, touching their heads and offering a blessing to them as they preened and sang.

Last week we heard about the lilies of the field, beautifully clothed, outshining even King Solomon. And that God delights in the lilies and the birds of the air and even more in humankind. If God delights in us more than in birds,

and if God's love can make a bird stand a little taller, then are we not a source for such delight? Can we not stand a little taller ourselves? The wild creatures with which we coexist: turtles, beetles, dogs and cats and fish and cows and giraffes--all beautiful, or whimsical, or industrious--are sources of delight, for God and for us. And we, too, are gorgeous, whimsical, creative, industrious, radiant beings.

When we are weary, heavy laden, grieving, stressed--we show it in our bodies. We hunch over, we tense up, we look at the floor lest we meet another's eyes and be seen in our grief. We spend a great deal of time and energy trying not to be undone. We protect our tender turtle bellies in armor that keeps others away, and in keeping others away, we stay burdened. We miss the life around us, the chipmunk scurrying across our path and the hand outstretched, waiting. We humans, often considered the stewards of nature rather than part of it, are not really so different from that flock of birds with St. Francis; like those birds, we sometimes don't know our own belovedness. So what can move us from being hunched and withdrawn to understanding ourselves as delightful and resplendent?

In the Scripture passage today, Jesus asks us to take his yoke, that his yoke is easy. The Greek work translated as "easy" also can be translated as well-fitting. When a yoke fits well, the weight is evenly distributed, making the work lighter for each ox. Life gives us burden enough to bear, but when we share our burdens with others, we find the load easier. In community, we see that we can share what might otherwise overwhelm. And, I believe, we have our beauty, worth, and dignity reflected back to us in the process. We, like the birds with St. Francis, can stretch our necks a little taller and hold our beaks a little higher.

Jesus tells how beloved we are, how we are called to the work of community, the work of finding the heart of God. He offers us much-needed respite for the journey, we need only follow his example. We need only reach out for community and find sustenance; we need only take time away, in the woods or a park or even by a sunny window in a library, to find rest. Jesus calls us to find the life that is well-fitted, a life of right-sized-ness, to find in the heart of God a way of walking that fits us. We are called to know ourselves as precious and beloved, even more than birds in flight or whales dancing in the sea. God delights and tends and cares for us, when we are joyful and energetic, and when we are

worn out, when we think we have no more capacity for ourselves, let alone for others. We gather here, or go for a walk in the woods, or play with our pets, and we find ourselves restored.

What a joy it is to bless the animals that bless us, to welcome them into our beloved community, to remind ourselves how lovely they are (and how lovely we are). May we walk together so that the yoke is well fitted, the burden is light, and journey is rich. Amen.