Introduction

The Environmental Education and Advocacy program of the ELCA offers a variety of resources to congregations to grow their intentional awareness of earthkeeping, and their responsibility as stewards of God’s creation. The program offers educational resources and financial assistance to congregations that want to integrate earth stewardship into their identity and purpose as a church. These programs generally center on the celebration of Earth Day on/around April 22nd when there is an intentional emphasis from the pulpit, in the music, and through education classes on the church’s earthkeeping role. For urban and suburban churches that are not agriculturally grounded, this day could be reduced to a novelty rather than an intentional day of reflection on lifestyle habits such as growing a garden, reducing energy consumption, and adjusting buying and commuting patterns. Our congregations as well as the ELCA at large, at times, can prioritize education in terms of knowledge rather than experience, and it is this experiential, interactive relationship between humanity and Creation that is central to our claiming of an earthkeeping role.

Given this situation, my project centers on the introduction of another Creation-theme liturgical service that will supplement Earth Day and invite an experiential engagement of the congregation with Creation: St. Francis of Asissi Day in October. The following outlines the theology, goals and service details.

Theology

Wesley Granberg-Michael’s article titled “Renewing the Whole Creation” outlines a theology of interrelationship that rejects the notion of human domination over Creation and moves beyond the approach of simple stewardship. The author outlines a theology that defines the value of Creation not on the basis of its utility for humanity’s exploitation, but rather on its relationship with God: a firmly theocentric rather than anthropocentric theology. Humanity is called to understand our role within Creation in terms of an interrelationship with, rather than a simple management over, the earth and its creatures, recognizing that
we are all created by God, sustained by God, and called to give glory to God.\textsuperscript{1} This theology of interrelationship is the foundation of the Blessing of Animals liturgical service as proposed in this paper.

George Tinker expands this theology in his article “For All My Relations”. This American Indian theologian notes that American Indians “see ourselves as co-equal participants in the circle (representing the whole of the universe), standing neither above nor below anything else in God’s creation…. there is no hierarchy in our cultural context, even of species, because the circle has no beginning or ending (and) all the createds participate together, each in their own way, to preserve the wholeness of the circle\textsuperscript{2} Tinker observes that Indian prayer encompasses \textit{Mitakuye oyasin} or “all my relations” that includes not only human kin, but also humanity’s kinship with all creatures on the land, in the air, and in the waters. The circular formation and liturgical prayer among the Lakota and Dakota peoples point to a theology of interdependence that underscores the importance of reciprocity and respect for one another for maintaining the wholeness of the circle. Tinker adds that Creation must not be experienced only as God’s initial, creative act, but must also be perceived through an eschatological lens of ongoing creation as humanity joins with all of creation in living into a fuller presence and reign of God. It is with this relational theology that the Blessing of Animals liturgy is enacted.

Goals

The goals of this liturgical service are relatively straightforward:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{Educational:} To celebrate the interdependence of all of Creation, emphasizing our relationship with and respect for fellow creatures on the earth, in the waters, and in the sky, as well as humankind’s responsibility for ‘maintaining the wholeness of the circle’ in our eschatological hope.
\item \textbf{Missional:} To create a liturgical service that is relevant and inviting to all people who share relationships with animals.
\end{itemize}

Liturgical: To educate Lutherans on the church’s rich liturgical heritage that can acknowledge the faith and life of a saint and that can then be appropriated to the identity and purpose of a specific church community.

Intergenerational: To cross the boundaries of age and culture that divide a congregation and gather people who share a common love of animals.

Setting

This service can be conducted outdoors on church property or indoors if sufficient protection of the floors (durable plastic sheeting available at home improvement and paint stores) is provided. To facilitate the flow of two and four-legged creatures, there should be defined stations with ushers. These stations could include 1) gathering and proclamation; 2) blessing; 3) blessing certificate; 4) memorial tree; 5) blessing bags; and 6) fellowship. Ideally, it one be a unidirectional flow so that a doubling-back is avoided. Also, since some animals may be nervous around others, there should be ample room and a regulated flow. It is also advisable to have an ‘accident’ team available for quick clean-ups.

Participants

This service can be conducted entirely by lay leadership drawing on a variety of ages and also non-traditional leaders who have a passion for animals. The congregation should commission 2-6 animal ministers (depending on the number of animals) who actually bless the animals. The following is an example of the blessing that they can memorize or revise:

(Name of animal) you are blessed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Let God’s love strengthen and comfort you. And may you and (owner) enjoy life together and find joy and peace with the God who created us all.

Readings

Scriptural readings should be central to the liturgical service, but I also envision other spiritual and also secular readings that can be integrated as a demonstration of the vastness of God’s Creation and expression. The following are examples of readings that can be integrated into the service:
Genesis 1:1-2, 20-31 - In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters … And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” … And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiple, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Genesis 9:16 - When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.

Psalm 104:10-25 - You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart. The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the conies. You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. People go out to their work and to their labour until the evening. O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.

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? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

"Canticle of Brother Sun” from St. Francis  All praise be yours through Brother Wolf, all praise be yours through Sister Whale, by Nature’s song my Lord be praised by Brother Eagle, Sister Loon, through Brother Tiger, Sister Seal, through Sister Flower, Brother Tree, let creatures all give thanks to thee, all praise to those who live in peace. Ask the Beasts and they shall teach you the beauty of the Earth. Ask of the Trees and they shall teach you the beauty of the Earth. Ask of the Beasts and they shall teach you the beauty of the Earth. Ask of the Flowers and they shall teach you the beauty of the Earth.

Chief Seattle  We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, and the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices of the meadow, in body heat of the pony, and man—all belong to the same family. So when the Great Chief in Washington sends words that he wishes to buy our land, he asks much of us... If we decide to accept, I will make one condition. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. I am a savage and do not
understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffalos on the prairie, left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and I do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important that the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive. Where is man without the beasts? If the beasts were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts soon happens to man. All things are connected. One thing we know: Our God is the same. This earth is precious to Him...This we know: All things are connected; like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life. He is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Certificate and Bulletin

An example of the blessing certificate appears on the final page, and an example of a worship bulletin appears as an attachment.
This certificate affirms the blessing of (Pet's Name) on October 4, 2003 at Fill-in-the-Blank Lutheran Church and affirms the loving relationship that this blessed pet shares with (Owner's Name) and with God in the glory of Creation.

God said (to humankind), “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food”. 

God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good. 

Genesis 1: 29-31a