

*“Things Our Dogs Teach Us About God”*

April 30      God Never Abandons Us

Psalm 13:3-6, Hebrews 13:5-8

I want to begin today by first thanking you for the pictures you have sent me of your beloved dogs. My heart has been warmed by the stories you have shared as to how these special members of God’s kingdom have brightened and enriched your lives. When I was in Kansas City attending the Leadership Institute, Adam Hamilton shared how he had preached a two week series on the Spiritual Lessons our four-legged friends teach us. That got me thinking. I came to realize that I wanted to do something like this. But I soon realized that I would need more than two weeks!

Animals in Bible times were more often valued for their fleeces, milk and hides than as pets. Even in that world, the Genesis creation stories said God created all living things, not just humans. This sermon series will focus particularly on what our dogs teach us about God. As soon as people started hearing about this they said, “What about us cat lovers?” So, later this summer I will also preach a series about what our cats teach us about how to relate to people.

I want to share with you a couple of quotes: *“Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole.”* – Roger Caras (writer and photographer)

*“The world would be a nicer place if everyone had the ability to love as unconditionally as a dog.”* M.K. Clinton (author)

When you shared your stories with me about your dogs, one image came through time and time again. It was how much they shower or showered love upon you. We humans talk a lot about “unconditional love,” and sometimes pledge it to one another. But actually doing it is so demanding that we very seldom achieve it, at least for any prolonged amount of time. Our dogs, on the other hand seem to manage it easily and, through this love, they show us one of the key qualities of God. That is that we can always depend on God’s love for us. Hear a couple of stories of love:

When our friend Audrey stayed with us the 2 months before she died Bella was her constant companion. She would sit and allow herself to be petted as long as Audrey wanted to. Bella isn't typically like that. She isn't a lap dog in that she will jump up on your lap a couple times a day to be petted for a short time then she is off. It was if she could sense that Audrey needed her. –*Gloria Mittlestadt*

Annie and Emmie came to live with us seven years ago. They are litter mates, two years old at the time that we adopted them. Exactly one week after we brought them home, in February 2010, I was on the patio watching them play in the small yard we had enclosed for them. I turned to walk back into the house and hit a patch of ice on the floor of the deck. Down I went, and landed heavily on my right arm, shattering the end of my radius. I underwent surgery that afternoon and ended up with a titanium plate and sixteen screws in my arm. Up until that night the dogs had been sleeping in a kennel on Phil's side of the bedroom. But that night, sensing that things were not well with me, Annie moved over to the rug at my bedside, soon followed by Emmie, where they continued to sleep nightly until we moved out of that house. To this day, when either Phil or I are not feeling well, they sense this and want to cuddle more than usual. They have brought so much joy and love to our home. –*Myrna Ford*

Most of you have had a dog who was always there for you. They greeted you whenever you came in the door as if seeing you was the most awesome moment of their day. When you were feeling blue or sick they sensed it and were extra attentive. Now I want you to take those feelings of love, dependability, and loyalty that those four-legged friends have given you and multiply it by a factor of 10. You are just beginning to glimpse a bit how much God loves you, is with you, and cares about you.

This is part of the good news of our faith. We are to share that type of love with others, but it is so hard to do. Why is that? Let's look at our doggy friends and see what they do and compare our responses. They greet us joyfully! Too often we let the events of life rob us of joy. We are tired, preoccupied, or we don't feel well, so we don't respond warmly to another when we meet them. Sometimes we don't even see them or acknowledge them. A dog would never do that. Unconditional love means, first of all,

that you greet each person with joy and anticipation, period. Just like a dog. It means putting our needs aside for them. This came home to me as recently we had to bless our big black dog into life eternal. His last days were filled with pain, even with medications. Yet, when I came home he would get up, even though he was hurting, and greet me at the door with a wag of the tail to let me know he was glad to see me. I wish everyone I came into contact would know, just by the way I greet them, that they are the most important thing in the world to me at that moment. Remember: "*The world would be a nicer place if everyone had the ability to love as unconditionally as a dog.*"

One you have earned a place of love in a dog's heart they are forever non-judgmental and always see us in the best light. You can be angry, upset, or grumpy and they still love you. In fact, as we learned, when we are at our worst they are at their most loving! They don't put pre-conditions on their love. Think about how often we do not act this way towards others. I hear, so and so is having a really bad time. They are just crabby all of the time. I am keeping my distance until they are doing better. Or, I am upset with them. When they apologize, I will get back in touch. Aren't you glad our dogs never do this! If they did, we would probably never have gotten much love because we probably wouldn't meet the requirements. No, dogs just love. Aren't you glad God doesn't treat us this way? God loves us, even when we are at our worst. This is unconditional love. It is what we are challenged to give to others.

Today I read two scriptures that ask us to trust that God loves us unconditionally. When we read Hebrews 13:5 we think it is only about money and our relationship to it. After all it says, "Your way of life should be free from the love of money, and you should be content with what you have." (CEB) But this passage is really about in what or who we put our trust. It goes on to say, "God has said, I will never leave you or abandon you." We often trust more in what we can buy or the money we have in the bank than in God. We are asked, "Do you tend to see God as absent when you need God most, as sort of dependable, or as a genuinely reliable presence whose steadfast love is with you at all times?" How you answer that goes a long way to you understanding or embracing God's love for you.

We hear in Psalm 13:5-6 “I have trusted in your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. Yes, I will sing to the Lord because he has been good to me.” Do we trust in God’s faithful love? Do we rejoice always saying the Lord has been good to me, no matter what might be happening today?

Think about your dog. They trust in your love. They are faithful in their love. They rejoice in seeing you. We need to thank Jesus for being with us right now. We need to continually be aware of his strong loving presence today and every day. It’s there! In trusting in that love we also have to learn how to be more loving to those around us. That means always willing to love, never putting conditions on it, and doing it with joy.

Camilla Rose became part of my life in May 2011 when she was 2 years old. She is a miniature Australian Shepherd and her previous owner was a high school student. Luckily for me, her owner did not realize that Aussies are very active dogs, even if they are “miniature”. She is a great asset for me since her bark alerts me to visitors at the front door. Once she knows the sound of the person’s car, she makes a totally different sound to alert me that a friend is visiting. When I do not feel well, she climbs into my lap and snuggles close almost like a hug. When she wants some treats, she is like an Aussie and “herds” me toward the cupboard where she knows the treat is stored. If I walk by and do not get the treat she sits in the middle of the doorway and looks up at me with an emphatic message that it is now treat time. She also has a bad habit of watching TV and “commenting” about TV commercials that include dogs. She can be in another part of the house, but recognizes the music and comes running so she can bark at the dog that is on the screen. Perhaps she is afraid the dog will enter her territory? *Carolee Dunn*

All of us go through some difficult times. God never abandons us. God loves us and surrounds us with care and grace. May we learn, from our four-legged friends to share that love with others.