

The Danville News
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"Pets Like God"
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We kid ourselves if we think we choose our pets. They chose us, every time. Zoe, our black Labrador puppy, gnawed on the bars of the SPCA cage, demanding: "Take me." How could we resist? It's fair to say we were predisposed to want a pet. Predisposition makes all the difference.

Before Zoe, there was Bosco, one of our many cats. We joke how years from now when new owners dig in the garden they'll unearth bones of all the cats who owned us, buried in the flowerbeds. We imagine them speculating about what kind of satanic rituals were going on here. What were those people doing? They were Hughey, Oliver, Owen, Mrs. Miniver, Jeremy, Pseudolus. Adric did it on cat terms after taking sick. One night, he wandered off. Sister, Nyssa, seems to still miss him.

Bosco was a kitten we met one night while walking our first dog, Earthquake, in the cemetery behind our first church. He was a tiny, forlorn kitten, alone and abandoned amongst the weeds. "No, no, no," I declared with full muster of patriarchal authority, despite four pairs of imploring eyes. The next night I came home after a church meeting, and guess who was sleeping on our doorstep?

"Who brought this cat here?" I bellowed. Three kids plus one wife replied, innocently, honestly: "What cat?"

This little feline fellow surprised us. What could we do? He chose us. "Come on in."

The weird thing is, you grow up together with your pets. The word, 'weird, comes from the Old English word, 'wyrð.'" In the ancient tale of Beowulf, "Gæð a wyrð swa hio scell!" translates as: "Fate goes ever as she shall!" So it is when a pet chooses you. Weird.

When the pet magic works, the pet summons our best. I don't think I could ever be without a dog. You really miss them when they're gone. We miss our bouncy and insufferably clever Irish Jack Russell. Our newest pet, a tug-of-war Corgi named, Gwendolyn Clover, is, however, putting this notion that I could ever be without a dog to the test. Why in our arthritic dotage did we get a puppy? I don't know. Senility? She's cute. She knows it. When we first met her, she wiggled up to my wife, requiring her fullest attention and affection. Stockier now, she demands from me patience. She makes me do what I don't want to do. She barks to tell me it's time I walk her. I have to pick up her stegosaurus size poop. She senses danger. She looks for sunshine. She's eager to love even when I'm less than tender. When I yell at her, her intuition makes me ashamed of myself. She wants attention and praise.

Hold it, friends. Gwendolyn sounds oddly similar to my understanding of God. 'Tis true, my Corgi is like God. I never before thought of God like a dog or cat. But that is close to how it works. Perhaps that is why God wants to be petted and praised. This might make God sound conceited, if we fall into the trap of anthropomorphizing God (whereas animalizing God is perfectly fine), as if this dynamic verb called God is a being rather than being itself, which leads us into appreciating Christmas. After all, without flesh, what good is God? How else can we know God? What good is faith, hope, love unless there's flesh? Love is predisposed to be incarnate, love actually.

We are bidden to offer praise for our own sakes, not as if God needs our praise. Praise, Milton's "Paradise Lost" reveals, benefits us. Praise means we recognize there is something beyond ourselves that is far more important. Praise gives us the chance to express a loving appreciation freed from our neediness or ulterior motives. Praise awakens in us awe and wonder. Praise keeps our earthly thoughts directed toward heavenly thoughts, for we become what we adore, what we worship. Take note, you silly so-called atheists.

Weird. God actually is just like our pet dog: Wanting everyone to play and be safe; Loyal and wanting to be loved; Making me become loyal and more loving in return; Teaching me to care for something that depends on me. My pets really have made me more human. Weird.

Maybe that is why we get chosen. We learn to give in. Welcome to your new home. Come on in. We need you. And even when you protest how they'll never sleep on the bed, they do.