

St. Francis Day Sermon 2018

20th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 22 - October 7, 2018 - Margaret Schultz

What are we doing today? Something we do only once a year; celebrate a saint's feast day on a Sunday.

Why this singular honor for St. Francis of Assisi? Because he is the most popular saint in Christendom. How do we know that? Well take a look in any garden store, most anywhere in the world or any statuary store, and there he is. He doesn't even look like a saint. There he is, without a halo, vestments or a book like a conventional saint; just dressed in a brown robe like an Umbrian peasant of his time with just a knotted rope for a belt. The only thing special about him is that every statue always has him holding or being surrounded by animals, and this is what distinguishes him for most people from every other saint. Perhaps this the reason that there are more entries about Francis in the National Library of Congress than any other person.

What's unique about him is his association with animals and the importance he gave them in his spiritual life along with the rest of creation. Francis showed them unequivocally to be manifestations of God's grace by inventing the Christmas crèche. In his first crèche he had an ox and a donkey on either end of the manger on which Mass was celebrated, a demonstration of how close he thought heaven and earth are and just how important they are to one another. He also instituted the Blessing of the Animals, which we will celebrate later today. The Blessing of the Animals is starting to become as popular as the Christmas crèche all across our country, particularly among those who aren't regular church-goers. We see this every year here. When we first celebrated it by ourselves, perhaps 20 parishioners showed up. Once we put out a broad, public invitation, our attendance grew to 60 or more. The majority of them are unchurched: the people who are described as "spiritual but not religious." That group that numbers 77% of the Pacific Northwest's population. Even as church attendance falls off, liturgies associated with St. Francis and his animals increase across the country. Recognition of this has even made the Vatican take notice and so St. Francis has been made patron saint of animals and ecology. When the current pope took his name, the significance was not lost on the world and we knew that there would be a compassionate change in the church. So why is this?

St Francis is the saint not of dogma but of relationship; with each other, with the poor with Mother Earth (Pope Francis), with all creation. He is not churched enough to frighten people by his appearance; in fact, his love of animals made and makes him a trustworthy figure – a gateway figure – for us all.. It's these animals who beckon us all to Francis's side today.

Today we live in a sterilized world. Since the Enlightenment, civilization with it's remarkable advances in science and technology, has created a disconnected world emphasizing intellect and thought over the concrete tactile relatedness of the earth and the animals. While other saints have reminded us of the sanctity and beauty of creation, its Francis alone who calls our attention to the animals; that they should be treated as something more than a commodity or pests or non-sentient beasts. For Francis, the animals were symbols for all of creation.

The most familiar story about Francis is his preaching to the birds. As any preacher will tell you, preaching is a relational endeavor. Francis' bird sermon also tells us that he listened to them as well as preaching to them, that he heard them chirping to greet him a good morning, saw them sitting on a branch displaying God's artistry and reminding him how close God is to creation.

Of course, this is no news to any of us who have been pet parents, animal companions, or wildlife observers. I hear my cats many different voices and hear: "I love you", or "oh yes keep scratching right there", and, of course, "feed me!" .

We underestimate the animals that surround us.

- There's a story of an army officer in Afghanistan who pulled out his service weapon, intending to commit suicide. The base's mouser, which had little human interaction suddenly jumped into the officer's lap, disrupting the suicide attempt, and saving the soldier's life. This action earned the cat US citizenship with free room and board!
- Or the dog whose wheel chair bound owner accidentally burned herself with household cleaners. When her dog found he could not pull her to safety he ran up and down the apartment's hallways barking to summon help.
- Or the cat whose unusually hard leg-rubbing puzzled her owner, but not enough to try and figure out why the different behavior. So the cat went to her sleeping baby's bedroom and started meowing into the baby monitor. The mother flew upstairs to shut the cat up before it woke her child and discovered – just in time - that her baby was turning blue.

We've all heard stories like these, along with the ones where service animals help the blind see, children read, comfort people in hospitals and nursing homes and do for PTSD victims what mental health professional say they cannot do. Isn't it time to put this all together and see animals as God-created parts of creation, and gifts to us?

Francis learned through his own experience with the natural world that we live in one sacred universe and we are all meaningful parts of it. That there is no sacred and profane – everything is a gift. Animals do a better job of showing that. Over the last 2,000 years, Religion has done a pretty good job of advancing abstract ideology and right practices. Unfortunately, what suffers is the personal, the relational, and the experiential. Yet that's the way our world works today. No wonder Francis is so attractive!

Ironically, it's to us that Francis is directing his sermons, calling us into a relationship with creation where solidarity with the suffering world is our starting place, not a quest for moral perfection.

Here's the thing: Francis was no individualistic Medieval hippie. Although he spent much time in solitary prayer, he also valued sharing God in community. That combination led to the creation of the Franciscan Order. He understood at a profound level that we are social beings who also need to experience God through our fellow human beings in community; only in that way, he believed, could we protect ourselves from our own egocentric tendencies.

In the end, I think we know on a very deep level that one of the great gifts and challenges Francis issues is this: can we look beyond denominational labels, beyond intellectual belief statements,

and recognize that to be truly religious requires a deep personal, relational spirituality. Religion is the container, not the content; what – hopefully – it holds is God’s Spirit. If we can grasp that, then we’re blessed!