

6 Pentecost 23  
Oct. 9, 2011  
Rev. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

We know more of St. Francis than of any other medieval saint. We have we his own words, his Rule, Testament, letters, poems, and liturgical writings, and also the intimate accounts of several of his disciples, written down within twenty years after his death.

Of course, there are a lot of other Christians from Medieval Europe who left behind them their own words and reflections, and about whom many have written extensively. Many of them were clearly inspired people, devoted to the risen Christ.

So what makes Francis so different? And why is it important to us?

His simplicity and grace of spirit, his transparent dedication to his ministry to others, they're part of the story.

We know several parts of the full answer to what makes St. Francis not just different than others, but placed him in an entirely different category than other great people.

A very obvious one is that his life, his very being, were filled with joy. He celebrated life – his own, and all creation. He did it by words and actions, he did it by singing - he sang all the time - in fact as he lay dying he was singing! Over the objections of one of the more pious members of his order who was concerned that Francis' "lack of restraint at so grave an hour might embarrass the order." Francis replied, "Please excuse me, Brother, but I feel so much joy in my heart that I really can't help myself. I must sing!"

Another part of that full answer begins with what we most obviously know . He loved animals. Our statue out in the Columbarium underscores that view of Francis – the coyote a reminder of the story of Francis and the Wolf, the birds a reminder of his sermon to them, the rabbit and the doe representing the rest of the animal kingdom.

For us to fully understand why Francis has become so important to so many in our day and age we have to go beyond those animals and birds, because in the greater scheme of things animals were no higher on his list than anything else.

Which is not to denigrate animals but to elevate everything else.....to elevate everything else.

There's a reason why one of Francis' writings is called the Canticle of Creation – it's in the Hymnal #406/407 – the reason is because Francis wrote and spoke about *all of creation as sacred and animated with the presence of God - the moon and sun are not objects in the sky but are subjects in God's family: brother son, and sister moon.*

It may come as a surprise to you to know that contemporary astrophysics agrees with this vision of the relatedness of all creation – though it uses different language, and no metaphors. Since

astrophysics reminds us, everything in the universe was created out of that first ‘big bang’ everything is, in a profound sense, related: we and all creation are stardust, and to star dust we will return.

Contemporary theology has another name for the Big Bang: the “Primordial Flaring Forth”, and it takes the neutral language of astrophysics and interprets it from the perspective of meaning: “The Universe” Thomas Berry said, is “not a collection of objects.”. The Universe “ is a communion of subjects.”

Rachel told me a story last week that speaks from this perspective. When she was three years old the world of her suburban Ohio backyard was, to her, a “vast, wild Eden”, a place of wonder filled with beautiful flowers and very green grass; a place to encounter the wind and the sun, ladybugs and bees. One afternoon she decided to pick a small bouquet of violets to give to her mother. When she took the flowers to her, her mother thanked her with a smile and gently took her over to the window, and explained how each thing there was alive and participated in live and was, therefore, sacred. Now the violets would die, whereas if Rachel had left them in the earth then her mother could have enjoyed them for much longer, and that the violets would have lived much longer and enjoyed the sun and rain and helped the bees make honey. Then her mother said something that Rachel has never forgotten: “Everything has its own value and is necessary to helping even more beings have their lives.”

Francis could have said that. In his own way, he did, he talked about the interdependence of creation, and the value of everything and everyone - every creature, animal, bird, human, tree, plant, rock - everything, in the sight of God.

Francis stands in a long line of Christian mystics who have seen and continue to see the presence of God in all of creation and so understand all creation to be holy.

We can see this “theology of respect” most obviously in the way that he treated animals – which is another way of saying that what we remember about Francis we remember because it’s the place where we are most touched personally and emotionally – by the living creatures we share this planet with, and, most closely, we share our homes with: that’s the point of connection.

Our animal companions are, in other words, living and breathing and moving metaphors for us – they convey the sacredness of creation – and they remind us of the hallowed and sacred way we’re called to respect and treasure the entire Created Order – all creation – in the same way we respect and treasure them.

This is a starting place for us. But it’s only a starting place. What about the rest of creation? If all creation is sacred, what should our attitude to that creation be? Certainly such a view demands we treat creation with respect and be responsible stewards when we interface with it.

And not a moment too soon! As theologian Thomas Berry has said elsewhere: We are living in a time of “cosmological and historical urgency” that calls forth a response “from the entire [human] community.”

An objective scientific explanation of creation is accurate but insufficient because it lacks the a moral imperative. When we objectify something we use, we consume it, and we don't see any connectedness or relationship with it. Down that abusive path lies exploitation and death – we can no longer endure the continuing damage that a solely objective understanding of our planet has imposed on us.

If, indeed, creation is “not a collection of objects” but “a communion of subjects”, a gift from God, imbued with the Spirit of God, then to treat it any other way than as sacred is to deny the faith that is in us. We are called, rather to protect creation and use it wisely, carefully, and with respect as we would any gift of such grandeur.

That, certainly, is what Francis believed. He is not alone.

May we sing with him in praise of creation and of God! And the people said Amen.