

The Celebration of Francis of Assisi, October 1, 2017 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton Jeremiah 22:13-16; Psalm 148: 7-14; Galatians 6:14-18; Matthew 11:25-30

Francis of Assisi! Francis was born in 1182, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, in Assisi. He died on October 4, 1226 at the age of 44, his body worn out, "used up for the kingdom" he might have said. He stands in a long line of Christian mystics – most of whom have been forgotten – who have seen and continue to see the presence of God in all of creation and so understand all creation to be holy, to be sacred.

While we know a lot *about* Francis from others, what we know *from him personally* comes mostly from *The Canticle of the Creatures*, which he began during a time of intense illness. It was out of that context, he told his brother monks, that he wanted to write. He said: "*I wish to compose a new hymn about the Lord's creatures, of which we make daily use, without which we cannot live.*" It was, as most of you know, a song of praise, which included references "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon and the stars" as well as "Brother Wind," "Sister Water," and "Brother Fire." On his deathbed, he added verses that included the line, "Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape." The last hymn we'll sing today is based on that canticle.

We all know about his love of animals, but we so often forget that this love was simply a part of his greater love of all of God's creation. What makes him unique is the way he lived out his faith.

First, he got Christian faith right, in that he didn't just talk the talk, he walked the walk; he lived his faith. He didn't get caught up in intellectual debates, nor doubt the meanings attributed to various scripture passages; he took Jesus' vision of companionate servanthood as his model for life. He understood preaching the gospel as, first and foremost, a lived example to others. Only when those lived actions failed to convince, he once said, should his fellow monks actually use words!

Second, as much as he's venerated today by the mainstream of our culture, he was, in his time, radically counter-cultural. Other monastic orders – expected to be beacons for how to live a Christian life – had lost their way. The culture in which he lived – thirteenth century European – looked down on the many of the things which were central to him, including poverty, prayer, fasting, and service to others. While many were drawn to Francis, many others rejected the way he chose to live and looked down on him.

Third, Francis did as much as he possibly could to avoid fame, to live in the shadows, to remain obscure and unknown. This was born out of his innate humility, and a wish to avoid being dragged into the spotlight. Today, many might think him crazy for doing this!.

And lastly, Francis never forgot his purpose: to serve others, especially those at the bottom of the heap: the poor, the sick, the outcasts.

To learn that Christian faith is not simply something that happens inside the walls of a church,

but also about acting with generosity and purpose outside those walls to help those who suffer, those who live on the margins – “the widow, the orphan the stranger, and the alien” to use the Old Testament’s list – and to do so without seeking that spotlight – these are lessons worth learning!

His humility, piety, actions and his love are reflective of his belief that the world – this planet – was created good and beautiful by God, but needed redeeming because of human sin. That’s coming down on the side opposite the other Augustine – of Hippo not Canterbury – and his theology of Original Sin. For Francis it was Original Blessing or nothing. All creatures should praise God, and human creatures – us – have a duty to protect and enjoy the natural world as both stewards of God’s creation, and as creatures ourselves. That love is a part of us and that duty is laid on us, not the least because as stewards we own nothing; our responsibility is to care for God’s creation so that we can pass it on to those who will come after us.

Today’s readings reflect some of that:

- Jeremiah - a century after the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Prophets but surely the theological kin to them – cries out against the injustice of those the wealthy who exploit the poor;
- Paul, writing to the community in Galatia, speaks of the controlling influence of Jesus self-sacrifice, and how this self-sacrifice has helped usher in a new creation predicated not on wealth or power, not on gender or affiliation, but on the humility that comes from recognizing what God has done and is willing to do for us;
- And Jesus – as reported by Matthew – speaks of the compassion of God that bears the sorts of burdens for us that we cannot bear ourselves.

The vision of the readings is reflective of who Francis was and remains; it’s a vision of a creation that is a gift from God – human beings, animals, rocks, hills, oceans – vision of this creation s fundamentally good. Through Francis – channeling Jesus – we are being given a divine mandate to care for, nurture, and protect this creation from the ravages of evil that humanity can so easily perpetrate on it.

I think you all know that this is not an easy thing to do! It will bring any who try and live into this vision and honor this mandate into conflict with those vested interests in our world who have absolutely no desire to care for, nurture, or protect this creation if such actions contradict or threatens their financial or social standing, or their power. Self-interest is, alas one of the primary human vices. And let’s be honest, we’re not immune from self-interest ourselves. We all stand under God’s judgment.

What I hear in people like Francis of Assisi, though, counters that self-interest. As we encounter God in our broader world – in generalities – that encounter draws us into encountering God in particulars also: in the beauty of the butterfly and the spider’s web, of the verdant forest and the snow-topped mountain, of the singing bird and howling wolf, the warm sunlight and the gentle rain, every living thing, small and large, every person, every community.

And encountering a glorious creation in specifics invites us into reflecting on a larger scale in

“big picture” terms, to honor and celebrate “the vast expanse of interstellar space; galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses [as well as] this fragile earth, our island home”.

The Celts would have absolutely understood Francis! They saw those moments of encounter with the glories of a good creation as “thin places,” moments where the divide between earth and heaven is narrowed, and becomes like a thin veil. Those moments are transformative; and Francis would have said “amen” to them, because that’s what Francis was, in the end, all about: the transformation of the world by the transformation of the self and then the community.

So those of you with animal companions bring them and come, this afternoon – if it rains we’ll gather in the parish hall – come and celebrate them, for they are living and breathing and moving metaphors for us; they convey to us the sacredness of all creation; they remind us of the responsibility we have to respect and treasure the entire Created Order – all creation – in its holy sacredness – in the same way we respect and treasure them.