

St. Francis of Assisi: More Than the Patron Saint of Bird Baths!
Matthew 10:7-13
October 3-4, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The Blessing of the Animals is like Brielle Day: we can count on beautiful weather! I always pray for dry and sunny, but in the 24 years we've been doing this, I only remember one rain-out. We bless our pets the 1st Sunday in October, to make it close to the heavenly birthday of St. Francis of Assisi, Oct. 4. This year the blessing lands **right on** Sunday the 4th! And for the first time, we're inviting pets to worship with us **before** the blessing, since we're worshipping outside at 10:30 ☺.

Francis shows up on our Lutheran calendar of commemorations not as the patron saint of bunnies or bird baths, but as a renewer of the church. That means someone who brings us back to Gospel values when our practices and attitudes run contrary to what Jesus taught us. Francis was born in the 12th century, in the year 1181, 839 years ago. The lessons he taught, the virtues he embodied, the vices he denounced, are all still relevant today.

In the midst of the devastating effects of climate change, including both fire and flood, when have we ever been more aware of the need to be wise and faithful stewards of Mother Earth? In Genesis God gives us "dominion," lordship over the rest of creation, the responsibility to be loving caretakers – **not** permission to "lord it over," abuse, pollute, destroy. Francis' love of creation comes across loud and clear in his Canticle of the Sun, which is the basis for our sending hymn, "All Creatures, Worship God Most High." Here's part of it:

Praise be to Thee my Lord with all thy creatures.
Especially for Master Brother Sun who illuminates the day for us,
and Thee Most High he manifests.

Praise be to Thee my Lord for Sister Moon and for the stars,
in Heaven Thou hast formed them, shining, precious, fair.

Praise be to Thee my Lord for Brother Wind,

for air and clouds, clear sky and all weathers
through which Thou sustainest all Thy creatures.

Praise be to Thee my Lord for Sister Water,
She is useful and humble, precious and pure.

Praise be to Thee my Lord for Brother Fire,
through him our night Thou dost enlighten,
and he is fair and merry, boisterous and strong....

Francis was a poet, clearly. He was also musical and could sing. As a young person he loved the party life; he **was** the life of the party. He was a romantic, imagining himself as a troubadour winning his lady's heart by singing at her window. He also imagined himself as a knight, charging off to battle and returning victorious. When his city state, Assisi, went to war with a neighboring city state, Perugia, he signed up to fight. He was captured, became a POW, languished in a dungeon until he was ransomed. Francis returned to Assisi quite ill. All of a sudden he had plenty of time to think, to reflect on his life. The Holy Spirit sowed seeds of change during Francis' imprisonment and extended recuperation.

Well enough to be out and about again, Francis stopped into a little church one day. It was called San Damiano, and it was in quite a state of disrepair. Francis didn't care; he just needed a quiet place to pray. As he knelt there, gazing at a crucifix, he heard Christ speak to him, quite clearly. The message was: "Francis, go and repair my house which is falling into ruin." Francis took that literally: shore up the walls! Repair the roof! Fix the windows! (Knowing Francis, evicting the church mice probably was **not** part of the rehab plan.) He had willingness, talent and time, but no money for materials. So he went to his wealthy father's cloth shop, took one of the most expensive bolts of fabric and sold it. His father was not amused and disowned him. The story is that Francis stood in the town square and announced that now he only had one Father, in heaven. From that point on he was basically homeless, penniless, and couldn't have been happier.

On Feb. 24, 1209, when Francis was about 27, he worshiped and heard the same Gospel we just heard from Matt. 10 (vv. 7-13). He heard those words as God's direct message to him and again, took them quite literally. So as he left the church building he took off his shoes, removed his outer cloak, left behind his staff and replaced his belt with a rope. Francis had no use for earthly wealth, only deep longing for treasure in heaven. He asked for and accepted alms, charitable donations, on behalf of the poor. He was now counted among the poor. His nickname was the Povarello, the Little Poor Man. He enthusiastically and often spoke of being married to Lady Poverty, whom he loved dearly. Among the Gospel values of which Francis **still** reminds the church are solidarity with the poor and simplicity of life: "Live simply, so others may simply live."

Francis had a charismatic personality, which may account why some say he is the most popular saint of all time. People were attracted to him like bees to honey: he was joy-filled, kind, funny, sincere, humble, real. His peace-loving personality may explain how he managed to visit the Muslim Sultan of Egypt during a Crusade and come away alive. Francis bravely ventured into enemy territory to meet the Sultan, intending to convert him. Not surprisingly, the Sultan didn't **want** to become a Christian, but he and Francis enjoyed many hours of conversation together and Francis was given safe passage back home again.

In the first 10 years of his new existence married to Lady Poverty, serving the poor, preaching the love of God to the people and to the birds, Francis attracted 5,000 men to join what has come to be called the Order of Friars Minor. Administration was not among Francis' spiritual gifts, so as the community mushroomed and conflicts multiplied, he became unhappy. His health was also failing (he didn't treat Sister Body well....) and he was becoming blind. Finally he turned over the reins of administration to others. In the last years of his life he enjoyed time and solitude for the prayer his mystic soul so loved. The only way he could imagine feeling closer to Jesus than

he already did was to experience the wounds of his crucifixion. History records that Francis did indeed develop wounds on his hands, feet and side, like marks left by nails and spear. We can't explain this phenomenon but it is called the stigmata. It's visible in many pictures of Francis.

Faith-filled stewardship, solidarity with the poor, simplicity, peacemaking, love of Jesus, love of neighbor, love of creation: these are Gospel values Francis lived and preached. He summed it all up in this advice: "Preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words." Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham