

Nineteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B) & St. Francis of Assisi  
Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8  
October 2-3, 2021  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A couple weeks ago *Rolling Stone Magazine* released an updated list of its 500 Greatest Songs. It's been 17 years since the last list was compiled, and a lot has changed. Almost half the songs are new to the list, including a much greater representation of Latin pop, R&B, country, reggae, hip hop. Aretha Franklin's "Respect" replaced Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" in the #1 slot. Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift ascended into the top 100. The Beatles, Fleetwood Mac, Stevie Wonder, all rose in the ranks, proving their staying power.

Another list made the news this past week, an updated list, a sad list. Federal wildlife officials announced the removal of 22 animals and 1 plant from the roster of endangered species and the addition of same to the tragic roll call of the "missing and presumed extinct." Apparently gone forever are 11 birds, 8 freshwater mussels, one bat and a plant. Among the birds are the ivory-billed woodpecker, once the largest of its species in our country, as well as birds from Hawaii, like the Maui nukupu'u, last seen in 1996. We will now have to listen to recordings to hear the beautiful songs of the Kauai O'o and Bachman's warbler, who used to commute between the Southeast U.S. and Cuba. Their music has otherwise been silenced. Overdevelopment, deforestation, pollution, human poaching, introduction of non-native species and climate change have all played a role. One bizarre fact I learned is that many of the island birds die of malaria transmitted by mosquitoes, which didn't originally live in the Hawaiian Islands but arrived on ships in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some birds fared better because they lived at higher altitudes, too cold for mosquitoes, but that changed as temperatures have warmed and mosquitoes have spread.

This weekend we remember and we celebrate St. Francis of Assisi, whose special day on the church calendar is this Monday, October 4. Francis has always been loved as a lover of creation and of all creatures, as a lover of the Creator and of our Savior, but he is even **more** relevant now as a modern-day patron saint of the environment, of environmentalists, of all who work to preserve Mother Earth and **all** God's creatures.

When pollsters ask people about their favorite saint, Francis often rises to the top like cream. His hometown of Assisi is a top Christian pilgrimage destination. He lived over 800 years ago, all the way over in Italy, but people of all faiths and of no faith are attracted to him like bees to honey. Francis exuded joy. He had a charismatic personality and a contagious love of the Lord. He was called the Poverello, the Little Poor Man, because he owned nothing but his ragged robe and a frayed rope cinched around his waist. But he **knew** himself to be **rich**: blessed with the beauty of creation all around him, the treasure of the Gospel to share with others, and his beloved Jesus to serve in the poor and the hungry, the outcast and the overlooked. ("Will you kiss the leper clean and do such as this unseen?" is a question asked in the hymn "Will You Come and Follow Me?". It comes from Francis' life. Everyone else ran from the lepers and he embraced them.)

Francis understood that all we have is a gift from God. He knew we are called to be faithful stewards of those gifts, taking loving and responsible care of them and also sharing them generously. He knew that many gifts come **to** us in order to flow **through** us to others. Francis was never ashamed to have his hand out for the sake of the poor. "Mendicant" is the word for members of a religious order who beg for money to fund their vocation of caring for the poor. Franciscans, members of the order Francis founded, are mendicants; they invite people's monetary gifts to fuel their ministry. They take a vow of poverty, so that they own very little themselves and hold the essentials in common. They ask for people's worldly wealth in humble

yet persuasive ways: “All that you have is a gift. Give of it generously to others.” As we do, they quote our Lord’s promises:

*“...[G]ive, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6:38)*

Francis, the Povarello, the Little Poor Man, had once been rich, money-wise. He came from a very wealthy family. His father was a successful cloth merchant, importing fine fabric, exquisite silks from exotic, far-away places. As a child and teenager he’d led a life of privilege. He had everything money could offer. He was talented as a musician and singer; he loved the stories of troubadours who won ladies’ hearts by serenading them. He was a romantic and he was a popular party boy! That is, until he became a soldier, was captured, languished for a year as a prisoner of war in a dungeon, finally was ransomed, then returned home, ill and broken in body and spirit. He met God in a new way through those experiences, and began to listen for God’s voice, all the time and not just on Sunday.

One day Francis knelt before a crucifix in a little church called San Damiano, which you can still visit today. That holy building had seen better days and was basically crumbling away. As he was praying he quite clearly heard the Lord’s voice saying, “Francis, rebuild my Church.” He was young and literal and went out to buy mortar and collect stones for material repairs. Over time he came to realize the Lord actually wanted him to “rebuild” the big Church by reforming it, sharpening its focus on the Gospel, bringing clergy and people into a deeper relationship with Creator, Savior, Holy Spirit.

Francis used nature in his preaching to touch the people’s hearts, like our Lord Jesus, who said:

*29 "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31 So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:29-31)*

The cool thing is that Francis didn't just preach **about** the birds. He preached **to** them. There's a book called *The Fioretti (The Little Flowers of St. Francis)*, written by one of his Franciscan brothers. In it we find the story of Francis preaching to the people, barely able to be heard over the chorus of bird chatter. He asked the birds to hold their song till he was done, and they cooperated by flying off and forming a cross in the sky as they left. It is also said the fish would swim up near the surface of the water to hear Francis if he was preaching by a river or lake. Perhaps the wildest story is how he tamed the wolf of Gubbio who was living on a diet of humans till Francis gave him a talking to and made him promise to eat only the food the people of Gubbio would faithfully leave for him. I think there is still a statue of the wolf in that town....

In the first lesson from Genesis (1:19) we heard:

*...out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.*

Francis understood that these creatures were God's gift to humanity, and that by naming the creatures, Adam became responsible for their well-being. Having dominion over them did not mean "lording it over" them but caring for them. Some riches God gives us to own and share, and some riches God gives us nobody can own but everybody can protect and nurture. This is why each week in the intercessory prayers, prayers of the church, there is always a petition for the well-being, the healing, the protection of Mother Earth and all she contains. It is not just the animals who live in our homes and whom we have named and call our pets, that we must care for. It is every creature the Creator has formed and given the breath of life.

The natural wonders of this world, the bodies of water (including the Atlantic Ocean, Shark River, Manasquan River, Metedeconk River, Barnegat Bay) and stands of forest, the Pine Barrens, the beaches, the mountains, the plains and deserts, the creatures great and small, are not disposable like Kleenex we use or Macdonald's wrappers we ball up and throw away in the trash. They are gifts of God. God has made us responsible for their care on our watch. Let us give thanks for those who teach us how to be ever-better stewards of Creation and those who work tirelessly to preserve that which is most fragile and threatened. Some good news:

Since the passage of the [Endangered Species] act [in 1973], 54 species in the United States have been removed from the endangered list because their populations recovered, while another 48 have improved enough to move from endangered to threatened.<sup>1</sup>

You may have noticed a statue of St. Francis standing at the entrance to our Memorial Garden. He's on loan from our friend Karen Kosequat, and he's been there since last year's Blessing of the Animals. One very hot day in August Ned glimpsed an injured fawn resting in the shrubs behind St. Francis. Such a beautiful, innocent creature, with its mama hovering close by, sometimes in the fenced-in playground and other times roaming among the gravestones, munching on the perennials. Of all the places to shelter in town, with woods right across the street and the bike path so close by, why did the fawn come to rest in our garden? St. Francis, I think.... Amen

<sup>1</sup>Catrin Einhorn, "11 Birds, 8 Mussels, 2 Fish, a Bat and a Plant Are Extinct, Officials Say" (*New York Times*, September 29, 2021), A17.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

