

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: October 7, 2017

The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi & Blessing of the Animals: Matthew 21:33-46

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) was born into a wealthy family at Assisi, Italy. He was the son of a cloth merchant. Francis received little formal education and during his youth was mostly preoccupied with partying with his friends. As a young man, he was popular and charming. He enjoyed practical jokes and was usually the life of the party. Because of his wealth, he generally picked up the bar tab in the local taverns and thus attracted a following of fun loving, rowdy young men and women.

When armed conflict broke out between the men of Assisi and the neighboring city of Perugia in 1202, Francis eagerly volunteered for the cavalry but wound up getting captured after the first big battle and spent a year in captivity. His health suffered. When Francis returned to Assisi, he was hailed as a hero, but unknown to his friends he had undergone a profound

transformation in his outlook on life and attitude during his captivity.

Although he was once again the life of the party, he was now questioning the reason for his existence. After much contemplation, including vivid dreams and mystic visions, he turned away from the pursuit of all worldly pleasures, sold all of his property and donated the money to the Church. He then began a lifelong passion of caring for all those marginalized, ostracized social outcasts, the sick, the poor, the lepers.

His wealthy father reacted to his son's odd new lifestyle by disinheriting him.

Now Francis lived in utter poverty and even went without shoes. But his humbleness, extraordinary kindness and love for humanity attracted the attention of other young men and women. They also chose to give up their worldly pleasures to follow him in spreading the gospel and serving the poor. Eventually, as the brotherhood grew, its members traveled to other parts of Europe to preach, including France, Germany, Spain and England. A separate order for women was formed when a noblewoman named Clare became a follower of Francis. Today they are known as the Franciscan Nuns or Poor Clares .

In 1224, Francis went up a mountain and began a 40-day fast. During that time he is said to have had a miraculous vision and received the stigmata, the

marks of the nails and spear exactly as they appeared on the body of Jesus during his crucifixion. After his death on October 3, 1226, Francis was declared a saint by Pope Gregory IX. For several centuries thereafter, his Franciscan order experienced continuous growth and is still very active today caring for the poor, educating youth, and performing many other good deeds.

Francis called for simplicity of life, poverty and humility before God. He worked to care for the poor, and one of his first actions after his conversion was to care for lepers. Thousands were drawn to his sincerity, piety, and joy. In all his actions, Francis sought to follow fully and literally the way of life demonstrated by Jesus Christ in the Gospels. His respect and appreciation for creation was so profound because it always led him to the Creator.

For Francis, the Holy Eucharist became the deepest source of support for his desire for cosmic peace and reconciliation. Just two years before he died, St. Francis said: *"I beseech all of you, by whatever charity I can, that you show reverence and all honor to the most Holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, because (in Him) all things, whether on earth or in heaven have been pacified and reconciled with Almighty God"*. Every year on the Sunday nearest his October 4 feast day, churches around the world will have services where

animals are blessed. These services are a powerful way to celebrate both Francis's and God's compassionate concern for all God's creatures.

Francis is well known for the "Canticle of Brother Sun." Written late in the saint's life, when blindness had limited his sight of the outside world, the canticle shows that his imagination was alive with his great love for creation and the Creator. The canticle inspired a movie film in the 1970s called *Brother Sun Sister moon.*

St. Francis of Assisi fully understood this mysterious relationship between the world and the person seized by God's love. At times, Francis could perhaps seem to us to be too simple, too naive, too content for our complicated modern minds. We pass far too quickly over his discipleship of suffering, his hard and penitential life, his long hours of contemplation and prayer, his courage in face of the challenges of his time.

So, my sisters and brothers, it begs the question, what was the fruit of this life entirely given to God? A man that the animals considered their friend; a man who considered the sun and the moon as members of his family; a mendicant monk, a beggar monk, who gave all to the poor and who called death his sister. Francis dared to plumb the depths of the mystery of creation. St. Francis believed *everything* was created for the glory of God and everything

God creates should give God this glory. St. Francis' significance in the contemporary world and our American culture is not simply quaint animal stories. Francis's life and message is of great value to us because Francis saw all of God's creation as sacred and holy in God's sight and that we must see God's precious creation through the creator's eyes.

I want to read a story from a 'Dear Abbey' column that I think is very appropriate for this feast day of St. Francis of Assisi.

Our 14-year-old dog Abbey died last month. The day after she passed away my 4-year-old daughter Meredith was crying and talking about how much she missed Abbey. She asked if we could write a letter to God so that when Abbey got to heaven, God would recognize her. I told her that I thought we could do so, and she dictated these words:

Dear God,

Will you please take care of my dog? She died yesterday and is with you in heaven. I miss her very much. I am happy that you let me have her as my dog even though she got sick. I hope you will play with her. She likes to swim and play with balls. I am sending a picture of her so when you see her you will know that she is my dog. I really miss her.

Love, Meredith

Meredith's mother wrote the following, we put the letter in an envelope with a picture of Abbey and Meredith and addressed it to God in care of Heaven. We put our return address on it. Then Meredith pasted several stamps on the front of the envelope because she said it would take lots of stamps to get the letter all the way to Heaven. That afternoon she dropped it into the letter box at the post office. A few days later, she asked if God had gotten the letter yet. I told her that I thought He had.

Yesterday, there was a package wrapped in gold paper on our front porch addressed, 'To Meredith' in an unfamiliar hand. Meredith opened it. Inside was a book by Mr. Rogers called, 'When a Pet Dies.' Taped to the inside front cover was the letter we had written to God in its opened envelope. On the opposite page was the picture of Abbey & Meredith and this note:

Dear Meredith,

Abbey arrived safely in heaven. Having the picture was a big help and I recognized her right away. Abbey isn't sick anymore. Her spirit is here with me just like it stays in your heart. Abbey loved being your dog. Since we don't need our bodies in heaven, I don't have any pockets to keep your picture in so I am sending it back to you in this little book for you to keep and have something to remember Abbey by. Thank you for the beautiful letter and thank your mother for helping you write it and sending it to me. What a

wonderful mother you have. I picked her especially for you. I send you my blessings every day and remember that I love you very much. By the way, I'm easy to find. I am wherever there is love.

Love, God

AMEN.