

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Vicky Carathanassis

October 2, 2022

Alright, I'm no fool, there's animals in church, maybe you're in charge of one of them, maybe one is actively trying to convince you to go pet them right now, like I've got to work to keep your attention this morning. *Why* are there animals here today, Vicar? What a great question! Today we celebrate the Feast of St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of merchants, needleworkers, families, and peace, as well as protection against fire, and dying alone. He is the joint patron St of Italy, along with St Catherine of Siena, founder of the Franciscan order, from whom we also get the Order of St Clare, put on the first ever live nativity scene *and* in 1224 had the first recorded case of stigmata! He's also the patron saint of animals and ecology.

I gave it some thought while working on this sermon and concluded that I'm of the opinion that it feels kind of...rude to have a whole feast day and not talk at least a little bit about the saint we're celebrating. Almost like throwing a birthday party, but not inviting the person whose birthday it is. So! Saint Francis: The Extremely Abridged Edition!

One day in Mass, St Francis heard the story of Jesus sending out the disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God. In that story, Jesus explicitly tells the 12 to take no staff, bag, bread, money, or even an extra shirt with them. St Francis took those instructions wholly to heart, donned a woolen tunic that he tied with a rope and went out to the countryside preaching the importance of loving one another as siblings, and peace. It's important to point out that he wasn't a priest or anything

when this happened. He was the son of a merchant, just Some Guy who heard the gospel and decided he was *really* going to go all in. And his intense dedication to a life of poverty had people conflicted. The church at that time was very rich, as where the men who held positions of power within it. So compared to them, Francis was being *very* radical. But this radical embrace of Christ's teachings also spoke to others. Francis would preach at up to five villages *a day*—which he traveled to *on foot* teaching a kind of doctrine that everyday people who weren't highly educated and didn't speak Latin could understand. And his preaching generally focused on God's abounding love for us and the need for community and love and peace.

And yes, St Francis cared deeply about non-human animals, and there's many stories of him stopping on his travels to preach to various creatures he met along the way, always addressing them as brother or sister, because in his mind we are all of us siblings with the same Father in heaven who loves *all of us* dearly. But his feelings went beyond that too. See St Francis saw *all of* creation as siblings. So yes, he stopped to talk to brother wolf and sister bees, but rocks, water, flowers, even death itself--*all of* creation--those he viewed as siblings too. If you want more examples of that, the opening hymn we sung this morning is derived from The Canticle of the Sun which was written by St Francis himself. See because for St Francis, all of creation is an interconnected expression of God's love, and all of us in all our various voices and means of expression, give praise to God.

And this mindset resonates so well with today's reading from the second chapter of Genesis. When we read the first chapter Genesis, we get a God situated in the cosmos making stuff. And on the first day he makes the heavens and earth, and then the sky. On the third you get dry land and vegetation, and the next sun moon

and stars. The fifth is all marine animals as well as birds. And on the 6th is all the animals of the earth before *finally* humans, and then God looked at creation and called it “very good.” And then on the 7th day, God rested. But in *this* story we get a very different order and focus. Keep in mind most modern biblical scholars agree these two stories were probably written by two completely different authors a few hundred years apart from each other. We don’t *need* to try to do work to reconcile the two stories with each other. They are two different ways humans have conceptualized the same story and there’s a handful of other creation stories throughout the Bible and those all differ from each other too.

Anyhow in this second creation story, instead of God like a conductor in the skies telling creation what to do, God is like a gardener, down on the ground molding and shaping the earth into individual living things. I picked a different translation than our usual one for this story today because...there’s some puns happening in the Hebrew, and they get hidden a bit in English translations. See “Adam” means “red” and is the name of the first person created, it’s also the Hebrew word for “human” and in Hebrew the word for dirt is “Adamah.” In this story humans and the soil are intimately tied together, it’s what we’re made and where our name comes from. It is why in his canticle St Francis addresses “Sister Mother Earth.” Because the earth is us and we are the earth, from dust we are and to dust we shall return. And you can’t really convey that same relationship in English as readily, which is how we arrive with the slightly goofy phrase “humans, humus from the soil,” which isn’t the same but I think is as close as we can get. And God breathes breath into Human, who then stands there on a barren desolate soil which sometimes exudes water, but other than that it has *nothing*. And this little Human

gets to watch as God takes what we might now describe as “wasteland” and transforms it into a lush and vibrant garden.

And God looks at this singular little creature that God has made and goes wait a second, this creature needs companionship. And one by one God starts building new and different creatures from that same earth and bringing them before Human. And it might seem like a petty or insignificant thing that God lets Human name everything but in much of the ancient world, to name a thing was to kind of specify or define the nature and essence of it. So God is inviting Human into the very act of creation, where God is shaping a creature’s physical form and Human is shaping its character. God and Human, side by side, in the mud making things, taking what was once desolate and transforming it into a place brimming with life. And Human is eventually differentiated into two sexes but notice only God gets to be in charge of that part, the first human got to witness the creation of every other living thing, but this was a private moment witnessed only by God, just as the first human’s creation was. And then we had two humans naked and unashamed in the garden living in harmony with all of creation. There’s no special differentiation, humans are just another of God’s creatures made of the same stuff as any other creature. And that’s not to say we’re not loved, because we are, but so are all these other creatures.

St Francis’ view of creation is that it’s a “free gift from God, given equally to all.” And that all includes the humans, and the dogs and cats and whales and trees and rocks and I could just stand here for hours trying to name all the things, but eventually someone would cut the mic on me, but whichever thing you’re thinking of yeah that one too. But we live on a planet where day by day we place human

convenience over and above the needs of any other creature. Forests are ripped down for new housing developments. Plastics invade the ocean. Smog chokes the skies. Animals are poached for fun, some to the extent that they become extinct. Sister Mother Earth is ripped open and exploited for her resources, and what is it to us if in the process we make the land uninhabitable to plants and animals that once lived there? Sometimes it feels like humanity is hellbent on returning ourselves to that pre-garden moment in the creation story. St Francis though modeled a different view. Creation is not ours to exploit but rather a testimony of God's love so abundant and profound that for St Francis it approached sacramental. It is not good for humanity to be alone, we *need* our non-human siblings. In them we see the testimony of God's love. I hope that when they look at us they can see that testimony too.

Today we give thanks for the animals in our lives and soon we're going to start offering our blessings to them. But later today when you're at home with your cat or hamster or dog or fish or porcupine houseplant or even that one tree you like to stop and look at on your walk to the building, I hope you take even just a moment to stop and listen to them and reflect on the many and various ways these siblings of yours bestow *their* blessings upon *you*. Amen.