

Yesterday and yet again this afternoon we will have the blessing of pets. We will be remembering the important link of human life to animal life. Hopefully we will remember other animals -- the ones that are harvested for their ivory to the point of endangerment, the ones locked into factory settings where life is short and brutish. We do this animal blessing in advance of the saint day devoted to Francis of Assisi--October 4th. This morning I would like to sketch some dimensions of Francis. I would like us to think of Francis in terms of three aspects of his life: St Francis the peacemaker; St Francis the one connected to nature; St Francis the one who embraced the life of poverty.

THE PEACEMAKER~ LAMBS AMONG WOLVES There were two of them and the journey lasted over a year. The time was 1219. They travelled by foot, Francis and a friar named Illuminatus. As they set out they met two lambs. Francis was overjoyed at the sight and said: Place all your trust in God. He then referred to Matthew 10:16: *Remember, I am sending you out to be like sheep among wolves.* They travelled south, towards Egypt and towards the Sultan of Egypt. It was the Fifth Crusade and war now was a way of life. One biographer writes *Not only had war, with its orgies and disorders become a necessity and a habit but it had become the preferred occupation, the ruling passion....* But to travel in poverty directly towards the enemy?

Francis and Illuminatus were set upon by wolves, that is, the soldiers of the Sultan. They were beaten and brutally treated. In chains, they were dragged before the Sultan, their lives in his hands. Francis boldly said that they were sent to bear witness to the Gospel. The Sultan admired his courage and his enthusiasm and his disregard for worldly wealth. Here was a man who bore witness to his brotherly love for the enemy at a time when the whole Christian society said *To kill a Muslim is not homicide* in the words of St. Bernard. Are we drifting towards such a time?

Francis faced the enemy during one of the most violent times in his society. *His compassionate love urged him on* in the words of an unnamed individual who witnessed the encounter. Francis' only rule for life was the Gospel. *Thus his unarmed approach, his brotherly love for the sultan, and his extraordinary capacity to contradict cultural norms reflected his understanding of how Christ would have faced the sultan.* He did as he understood: Francis writes *The Lord says, 'Love your enemies.'*

And so Francis of Assisi was a peacemaker, following the way of Christ. Should we not also strive to find our way to peace? Prayerfully and humbly? In Ephesians 2 we are reminded: *But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our*

peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

FRANCIS IN NATURE ~ BIRDS ON THE SHOULDER More years ago than I would care to remember, Marilee and I sold vegetables at the Beloit Farmer's Market. A few stands down the line was a couple who grew vegetables. Denny also taught at Blackhawk Tech as did I and so we developed a Saturday by Saturday friendship with a few encounters at the school during the week. One day we were discussing various types of garden hoes and he casually mentioned that in the field, hoeing his crops, at times in the silence of his work he actually had had birds come and land on his shoulder or head. Of course, we both immediately thought of Francis and this iconic image of one human being attuned to nature.

If he were to come back today and take stock of the world as an intended garden -- Paradise-- what would Francis think? I wonder: What would he think of the internal combustion engine, of animals in factory farms, of smokestacks and open coal pits? What would he think of nuclear reactors and nuclear weapons? : What would he think of oil and gas pipelines and their leaks, downplayed and under-reported? What would he think of our blind disregard?

We all know that his sadness would be profound. Would he be able to understand our post Hiroshima state of affairs, our smog, our polluted water, our dying marine world? Professor Lynn White, a professor of medieval history at UCLA in an address a few years ago stated *No creature other than man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order.* This should put us on our knees. ... Francis, in recent times, has become a kind of patron saint for ecologists. Poems have been written of his connection including these few verses:

Saint Francis of the pheasant and the turtle dove/ Of the cicada in the olive grove/ .../ of fireflies by the river/ of fishes in the lake/ of poplar and pine/ of cypress and oak/ .../ of the honey bee/ Teach us humility.

FRANCIS AND POVERTY~ THE BROWN ALB IN A TOURIST TOWN In January of 2011, Marilee travelled to Assisi on a local bus travelling from Rome. We arrived at a bus stop just below the city and stared in silence at peaceful city in the crisp January air. It seemed to be built into the mountain. It was a marvel.

Francis died in 1226. He was canonized just two years later, the same year 1228, that work began on a basilica in his honor. As we walked towards on a day without tourist crowds we passed a

life-like Christmas creche still erected. Francis' tomb is in the basement of the church. And not far way lies his brown and tattered alb -- under glass.

It is impossible not to reflect on the irony of these things. And yet staring at his brown alb brought home to me the reality of Francis' poverty. It was not only tattered. But it was stitched and restitched and patched over and over.

Poverty--a brown alb in a tourist town. Francis rejected the promise of wealth presented to him by his father's business. Instead he chose what he termed Lady Poverty. He emptied himself and in the process made room -- created internal space for nature, for peace and nonviolence, for others. And also for joy.

Just this past week in our Bible study together we read a hymn from the second chapter of Philippians. It is about Jesus and in part it states that Jesus:

Who, though he was in the form of God,
Did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited (grasped)
But emptied himself,
Taking the form of a slave

Poverty was at the heart of Francis' life and his poverty takes us back to Jesus himself. In this hymn of the early church we understand the devotion of Francis to Christ his Lord and the devotion of Jesus the Anointed One to his own heavenly Abba.

Today in our Gospel lesson Jesus speaks of slavery. He speaks of hard arduous work and at the end he has the slaves saying in abject humility that they are only worthless slaves and that they have only done what they ought to have done.

Both Francis and Jesus were slaves. Both emptied themselves. Both were humble and practiced non violence. Both connected incredibly with others. And Francis with his patched up brown vestment and in his poverty and in his incredible joy would say to us that he only followed, he only served, he only worshipped the LORD, the Master, the one who calls us still.

In the name of God--Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

~ The Rev. Brian E. Backstrand, Rector