

I will never forget the day when, at age 17, I was browsing around my local library and stumbled on some books about the saints, and I opened up to the page of a painting of St. Francis of Assisi. It was one of the more radical paintings of Francis, not a warm fuzzy picture like we often see (like Francis and the birdbath), but an almost disturbing one - it was the painting of Francis receiving the stigmata of Christ (the wounds of Christ in his hands, feet, and side) by a seraph. My jaw dropped. The picture shocked me, but more than that, it beckoned me to want to know more, much more about this strange and very foreign image that made me realize I had absolutely no concept of how something like this could fit with the Christian faith as I knew it. We never talked about saints, mystical experiences, or other oddities in our church or in my family. I even wondered if this was really part of the same religion. But I would say that it was from that day and that painting St. Francis began to “haunt” me and it may have been that very moment that started me upon a different path in my spiritual journey that ultimately led me to the Episcopal Church.

We are currently celebrating the season of Creation and are in what is known as “Francistide”- which lasts from Sept. 17 until Oct. 4 - St. Francis Day. The current pope is the very first to take Francis as his name and Franciscan spirituality has an important role to play in the stewardship of creation that we have been called to undertake going back as far as Genesis.

St. Francis was born in 1182 and was raised in a wealthy and noble family. He was also a soldier, a playboy, and was quite popular in his town of Assisi. He had everything he needed, yet when he experienced his conversion to Christ, he regarded all he had as rubbish. It is said he threw his family’s belongings out the windows and into the streets after his conversion. When his father tried to have Francis pay him back, Francis left his home and the city itself with nothing, giving even the clothes he was wearing back to his father.

He then received a vision and call from God to rebuild the church. Francis immediately embraced

the lepers and tended to them, wearing the same un-dyed gray, tattered robes the lepers wore. It was those very robes that later became the Franciscan habit. Francis owned nothing, was homeless, and even begged for his bread each day. He desired nothing more than to know and serve Jesus fully and completely, taking poverty as his bride and adhering quite literally to Jesus’ words in Luke, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Later Francis founded an Order of brothers called the Friars Minor and then helped St. Clare found a women’s Order later known as the Poor Clares. Today there are Franciscans all around the world and our own Episcopal Church has several Franciscan Orders of brothers, sisters, and even lay Franciscans living in the world.

One of St. Francis’ legacies is that he considered all that God created and every creature as his brothers and sisters. He preached to the animals as well - like the birds that we read about today because Francis truly believed and taught that God is to be seen everywhere in the natural world. Francis reveled in God’s creation as not only beautiful, but as a revelation and teacher to us. He saw animals and creation itself reflecting the glory of their Creator and beckons us to do the same. He became known as the patron saint of animals soon after his death, as early as the 1200’s, and Pope John Paul II formally declared St. Francis the Patron Saint of the Environment and Ecology in November of 1979. And if you haven’t noticed our St. Francis window yet- I encourage to look at it- St. Francis is pictured with several animals – the wolf of Gubbio and, of course, the birds.

Here are a few quotes from St. Francis on the topic of animals:

“All things of creation are children of the Father and thus brothers of humanity. ... God wants us to help animals, if they need help. Every creature in distress has the same right to be protected.”

“Not to hurt our humble brothers (the animals) is our first duty to them, but to stop there is not

enough. We have a higher mission - to be of service to them wherever they require it.”

“If you have those who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have those who will deal likewise with their fellow humans.”

Finally, we have the song, the canticle, that Francis composed called the “Canticle of Brother Sun” – and I invite you to listen again to these words – as I read an excerpt from it:

“Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,  
especially Brother Sun,  
Who is the day through whom You give us light.  
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,  
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.  
Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,  
So useful, humble, precious and pure.  
Praised be You my Lord through our Sister, Mother Earth  
who sustains and governs us,  
producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.  
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,  
And serve Him with great humility.”

St. Francis continues to be a model to us of what we might aspire to in terms of compassion and care for God’s creation and his life and teachings inspired the concept that churches all across the world are observing today and this week, “The Blessing of the Animals.” How might we more fully emulate Francis’ love of God’s creation? How are we called to show greater compassion and love for all God’s creatures? What changes might we be called to make in light of the wonder and revelation that God’s creation teaches us?

May we all have the fervor, wonder, dedication, joy, and compassion of St. Francis as we embrace his love for God’s creatures and God’s amazing world. AMEN.