

St. Francis is known as the saint of animals, and this afternoon at 2pm, weather permitting, we will continue that tradition by having a short Blessing of the Animals service outside the South Bay Community center. You are welcome to come and bring your animals or their photos. Francis is the patron saint of animals because he preached to birds, and saw each creature as beloved of God in their own right, not just because of us. Yet his relationship with animals is only one part of the story of St. Francis.

He was really a little crazy. Born into a wealthy merchant family, as a young man Francis was in a church which was in very poor repair, when he heard God say “mend my church.” He took this quite literally and stole a bolt of expensive silk from his father’s warehouse in order to raise the funds to do so. Not surprisingly his father was outraged. So much so that they had a public confrontation in which he disowned Francis, and Francis in turn took off all his expensive clothes and walked away naked, declaring himself wed to “Lady Poverty.”

After that he survived by dumpster diving and doing odd jobs for which he asked payment in food not money. He lived with the local priest and began to rebuild the church with his own labor and scavenged materials. He took care of homeless people especially those who were considered lepers and had open sores; his friends were people who others wouldn’t go near.

Not an attractive lifestyle. But it did attract others. They were crazy enough to take the words of Jesus very literally, particularly when he sent out the disciples to preach the reign of God taking absolutely nothing with them. Within three years the group had grown so much that Francis started the order of Friars Minor, which we call the Franciscans.

Francis also took Jesus’ call to us to be peacemakers quite literally. In 1219, Jerusalem and much of the Holy Land was under Moslem control. European forces had launched the Fifth Crusade to win Jerusalem back. Francis went to the Middle East and was allowed through enemy lines to meet with the Kurdish Sultan of Egypt. In his crazy way, he thought that he could make him a Christian. Francis failed, but did get him to agree to terms of peace. Unfortunately the European powers didn’t agree and the fighting continued.

So when we strip away the sentimental animal lover picture, we find underneath an eccentric person who took God’s words very seriously.

I wonder how it would be if we were to take this morning’s readings as seriously as St. Francis might. Jeremiah points out that building a big, beautiful house on the backs of the workers is unjust, and in fact big houses are not important. What’s important is providing justice for those who are in need. Justice means finding ways to end poverty and homelessness, not just giving handouts but working to change the structures which keep some people impoverished while others are comfortable and even wealthy.

In Galatians, Paul reminds us that it doesn’t matter whether we are Jew or Gentile; what is important is that we are a new creation. Instead of being proud about our heritage or our education or what we have achieved, the only thing we can really be proud of is that God loved us enough to come and be one of us and die an ignominious human death so that we might be a new creation. The old creation is somehow marred and is caught up in the sin matrix, but we are

part of the new creation which can live in right relationship with God. In the old creation we were cast out of paradise because of sin, but now we are building the new paradise, the new creation of oneness and surrender to God right here, right now. The water of baptism symbolizes our movement from the old to the new. The bread and wine that we share is a symbol of the new covenant with God - one in which we are called to become Christ-like beings serving together in the Body of Christ.

That is the most important thing about us now, that we are servants of God, members of Christ. All the human labels that define us are unimportant because we are marked as Christ's own forever. It is irrelevant what color we are, whether we graduated from college or even from high school; whether we are gay or straight or neither; whether we have a nice home or are living in a car; whether we are able bodied, whether we are working, whether we have savings, whether we get food stamps. All these things are irrelevant. What is important is that we are a new creation in Christ and that is where our self-respect and pride should be based.

Which is not at all how we tend to think. It's counter-cultural and difficult to wrap our minds around the idea that we are called not to be followers of a great warrior, but disciples of a man who apparently failed. A man who caved into the authorities and allowed himself to be betrayed, allowed himself to be beaten and mocked and allowed himself to be publically executed. That's whose we are.

Which is why in order to really understand it we have to let go of all our previously held notions and become as little children. Because, Jesus says God has "hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and has revealed them to infants." The word used here for infants means those without words – preverbal. That's how far we have to let go of cultural norms in order to really be able to wrap ourselves around the truths that Jesus teaches. Which is why Francis was seen as crazy by his society.

But Jesus tells us that this is the way to God. This is the way to find rest for our souls. In the creation stories we are told that after God created the world, God rested. God rested, with all of creation in right relationship. Our rest is also in the new creation. Our rest is in God.

We continue to think that everything depends on us; that somehow we have to figure it all out and make sense of the world. We think that we have to know how to live holy lives and that we have to work out how to be in right relationship with God, and with our family and friends. But Jesus tells us to put down the burden of trying to be God. We aren't God and we were never intended to be. We were made to be dependent on God. Yes we get to be active participants in creating the reign of God, but we are participants, not the main show.

Jesus invites us into a partnership in God's service; Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," he says. A yoke is placed on the shoulders of two oxen who work together. When we are working together with Christ, we are able to rest secure in the knowledge that ultimately all will be well. It doesn't mean that things will be easy or that we will be successful.

Everything didn't go easily for Francis or for Jesus. Neither of them was successful in the ways we usually measure success. In fact, from our human perspective they were both crazy.

That is who we are. We are crazy Christians. We are called not to be nice people but to be crazy people. People who can go fearlessly into life whether that means dumpster diving or talking to international leaders; people who talk to birds and who don't fight back; people who are surrendered to God.

May God bless each one of us with divine craziness.