

St. Ben's 10.1
St. Francis day

Let the Words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Holy One.

Today, we celebrate the Feast Day of St. Francis, who cared not only for the poor but for all of creation. After our service and coffee hour today, there will be a Blessing of the Animals near the South Bay Community Center. We hope to start around 1:30.

I remember the first Blessing of the Animals I participated in before going away to Seminary. It was a truly joyful experience. I remember someone brought their pet rabbit who had a little harness on. I was surprised at how calm they were around all the dogs. When it came time to have them blessed, the little rabbit just hopped right up to the priest for their blessing like they knew what to do. It was really adorable. I had this deep sense of an expanded understanding of creation and

God's connection to everything at that moment. I felt more connected to St. Francis and his interest in preaching and speaking to the birds and animals on his path as well. Why wouldn't we speak to the animals? They clearly have things to say to us, even if we don't speak the same language. I felt a deeper curiosity about how we truly are all connected.

St. Francis didn't start as an animal advocate. He began as the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. However, his military experience and his experience with an illness led him to reflect on his purpose in life.

According to A Great Cloud of Witnesses, a church resource on the Saints. The story goes that he heard God calling him to "repair his failing house", and Francis literally sold a bale of silk belonging to his father to repair the church.

This infuriated his father, who disowned Francis. In response, Francis renounced his father's wealth and, according to one account, stripped off all his clothing, walking away naked and declaring himself "wedded to Lady Poverty." This act began Francis' time serving the poor, helping those who were sick, and ultimately moving in with the Priests of the church he had repaired.

As Francis continued his life and journey, stories emerged of him giving sermons to birds, calming wolves that had been terrorizing towns, and ensuring that his message was expansive and inclusive of all of God's creation. At the time, this was unique amongst Francis's contemporaries.

Calling out to Brother Wolf and Sister Bird as he prayed or preached. He becomes an example for us of one who cast off the trappings of the world to follow the teachings of Christ and calls us to expand those blessings to all of God's creation.

One of my favorite quotes attributed to St. Francis is, "Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith."

I think this quote weaves several of the lessons we have encountered during our season of creation together. We started with prayer, then moved to learn, continued with Act, then advocate, and concluded today with bless.

St. Francis has many prayers and quotes attributed to him making bless a very appropriate word to highlight in our service today.

Our Gospel text is an excerpt from Matthew that we also encounter at another time in the lectionary cycle so it might sound familiar. Here we find Jesus in prayer giving thanks because God has "hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;" Remembering that infants from earlier chapters of Matthew (5:3-12) are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, and the persecuted. Thus, they can see what the wise and intelligent cannot. They

have a unique perspective. As the text turns to Jesus's invitation, we hear the part of Matthew's Gospel that has come to comfort many.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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.”

But who are the weary in this Gospel? Of course, this speaks to us in our modern context as we struggle in our everyday lives trying to find the burdens to lay down, the ways we might be overcommitted, but what if this Gospel is calling us to see ourselves as the wise and intelligent who participate in the systems and structures that contribute to those who are weary in our own day.

And yes, of course, we can be both.

What if our encounter with this Gospel today asks us to embody the path of St. Francis and reflect on the purpose of our Christian Life?

Now, I'm not advocating that we all strip down naked and become Vowed religious, yet maybe we can take a page from his book and reflect on what is really of value to us, think about how we are participating in the systems that we may, or may not value and what actions might we want to take to change that.

This is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and we should support each other in community as we explore what these changes might look like.

St. Francis has the Priests and future folks who would join his religious order to support his work.

I wonder who are the people who are your blessed companions in your ongoing spiritual work?

As Jesus calls us to learn from him and find rest for our souls. I hope that we look to those in the pews surrounding us and those who support us near and far. Finding ways to learn from Jesus can't be done in a vacuum but must be done in

community, including those beloved animals that may not be present in church with us today.

They have much to teach us.

I'd like to conclude with a gratitude prayer also attributed to St. Francis.
“We give you thanks with all your creatures: With Brother Sun who gives us your light, with Sister Moon and the stars of night, with Brother Wind, and Sister Water and Mother Earth who feeds and keeps us. We thank you Lord of heaven and earth for revealing your way to the lowly and least.” **Amen**