

Francis of Assisi
Year C - 2/10/2016

Genesis 2: 4-9a, 19-22
Psalm 150
Romans 8: 18-27
Matthew 6:25-33

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It is a wonderful feast day that we celebrate today - that of St. Francis. But it makes me wonder - why do we only take animals to church once a year? Aside from assistance animals, most churches only allow them into worship on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Why is that?

Maybe it's because bringing animals into church is crazy. Celebrating St. Francis Day is risky, because there's no way to know in advance what the proportion of growling to wagging, and hissing to purring, will be. But celebrating the Feast of St. Francis with our companion animals makes us more aware of the fact that relationship always involves risk, and that the God who risked everything for us calls us into relationship anyway - with God, and with all our fellow creatures, the infinitely varied works of the divine hands.

It's appropriate to go a little crazy on St. Francis Day, because during his own lifetime, many people thought Francis himself was insane. They thought he was crazy in his 20s, when he stripped naked in the town square to renounce his inheritance in front of his parents, the bishop and the entire population of Assisi.

And when he kissed and hugged lepers, cleaning their wounds with his ungloved hands. They thought he was crazy when he preached to the birds, calling them his "little sisters" and remarking that they paid better attention to the gospel than people did.

And later, when he founded an order grounded in the belief that Jesus Christ's disciples could live as their Lord had, owning nothing, begging for what they needed and trusting God to provide for them as he did for the birds, the fish and the lilies of the fields.

People who had more possessions than they needed thought Francis was crazy because he refused to distinguish between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor. He gave to everyone who begged from him -- money or food if he had any, or a smile and a kind word if he had nothing else to offer.

Everything Francis did was interpreted by someone as a sign that he had lost his mind. Francis didn't argue with them. He openly admitted that he was a fool, but not just any kind of fool. He was fool enough to believe that Jesus actually meant his disciples to live as he had instructed, when he said things like "Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven," Or "If your brother or sister sins against you, forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven times."

Francis latched onto these words. And from that moment on, he lived a life of deep vulnerability and deep joy, unconstrained by any of the barriers human beings erect to make ourselves feel safe. The barriers between us and those who have less than we do, in whose presence we feel ashamed; between us and those who have more than we do, in whose presence we feel jealous; between us and those we've hurt; and between us and those who have done us harm.

The barriers between human and animals, whom we too often treat as objects, disregarding the fact that they have their own inner lives of which we understand very little; and between us and the rest of creation, which we try more often to control than to respect. Francis called his friends -- he calls us -- to stop trusting walls, physical and emotional, to keep us safe. Instead, he invites you and me to join him in a life of holy adventure.

The Feast of St. Francis is a day to bless animals and to ask God's forgiveness for our mistreatment of them and of the Earth, the home we share with them. And in celebration of our brother from Assisi, it's also a day to bless children, a day to bless the poor, a day to bless our enemies, and a day to bless holy fools who are crazy enough to live as citizens of God's kingdom in this life, not waiting for the next.

May Christ teach us what crazy gospel acts may be ours to do. And may God give us the grace to accomplish those things as wholeheartedly, and as single-mindedly, as Francis did...

In the name of God. Amen.