

We're going to take a break this morning from the scriptures suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary to observe, a few days late, another great Christian tradition. In the language of the New Testament, all believers in Christ are saints (small "s"), the ones set apart for God. This is language that Baptists still use. When we talk about "equipping the saints," as we sometimes do in church circles, we are talking about preparing all of us Christians for our work in the world. But over time after the New Testament books were written, the two oldest branches of Christianity, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, began to honor certain Christians with the title "Saint" (capital "S"). These men and women were often martyrs who had died for the faith but were always those who were considered exemplary in some way in their lives of faith. Each of them was assigned a feast day, a day to specially remember them, usually the day of their death, which was often more reliably known than the day of their birth. This past Thursday was the feast day of one of the best known and most loved Saints of the Roman Catholic Church, Francis of Assisi.

When I was a young boy, many of my favorite books and television shows dealt with people who could talk to animals, or at least understand animals in a special way. There was "Tarzan," as played on television by Ron Ely or on old movie reruns by Johnny Weissmuller. There was "Gentle Ben" about a bear and a boy, and "Fury" about a horse and a boy, and "Flipper" about a dolphin and a couple of boys. That one was a big personal favorite, since I lived just off the beach in Florida. There were several incarnations of "Lassie", of course, although even when I was a boy Lassie seemed just a little too far-fetched. I've always appreciated the cartoonist, I think it was G.B. Trudeau, who drew a couple of panels of a TV with dialogue coming out of it. In the first panel, the sound bubble was of a dog barking. In the next came the response: "What's that you say, Lassie? You say Timmy's fallen down the well and broken his leg and is in a diabetic coma and needs his insulin? Come on girl, we'll go help!" My true favorites, I think, were the old English books about Doctor Doolittle. Not the modern incarnation with Eddie Murray and a bunch of potty-mouth mice or even the Disney-fied musical with Rex Harrison, but the original books by Hugh Lofting with simple line drawings by the author of the portly little veterinarian in a top hat and all his wise animal friends.

With that sort of cultural preparation, it's little wonder that I fell in love with the story of Francis of Assisi when I was introduced to the Saint at school in England. My English schooling came courtesy of the Church of England, as did that of my neighbors, so there was no concern about the propriety of teaching young children about the heroes of the Christian faith. I also remember being mightily impressed with stories of the missionary work of Dr. David Livingstone, made famous by his rescuer and biographer, Henry Stanley. But Francis was really special. Here was a real person, not a fictional character, who could apparently talk to animals and be understood by them.

As I grew older, this legendary part of the life of Francis became less important for me than "the facts" of his life. He was born Francesco Bernardone in 1182, the son of a wealthy silk merchant in Assisi, a town in Umbria in central Italy. His father named him Francesco, "Little Frenchman," it is said because he hoped to ingratiate himself with the wealthy French who were his biggest customers. Francesco was apparently as rowdy as most well-off young men of the time and he lived well and frivolously until two stints in the militia, a year as a prisoner of war, and two serious illnesses turned his thoughts to more serious things. His final conversion to a

life of poverty and service has become a famous story. One day, in the little country church of San Damiano, just outside the walls of Assisi, Francis seemed to hear the voice of Christ coming to him from the crucifix: "Francis, repair my falling house." He took the words literally, and sold a bale of silk from his father's warehouse to pay for repairs to the church. His father, not unnaturally, was outraged, and disinherited and disowned Francis publicly. In response, Francis renounced his father's wealth -- one account, later used in Franco Zeffirelli's film of Francis' life, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon," says that he not only handed his father his purse, but also took off his expensive clothes, laid them at his father's feet, and walked away naked. I should say at this point to our young people that this is not an episode in Francis' life that I'd suggest you imitate.

Francis then set to the tasks of rebuilding a number of ruined churches in the area, nursing lepers, preaching and performing other works of charity. He soon attracted followers who, in time, became the recognized order of Friars Minor, the "little brothers" or Franciscans. To this day, the Franciscans emphasize a love of God's creation and those who have been marginalized by society. Because he chose to embrace poverty and often lived in hardship, Francis died at the age of 40.

Not all of Francis' preaching was to men and women. He was famous during his life for preaching to birds and fish and other animals, which quieted and gave every indication of listening when he spoke. He always referred to them as brothers and sisters as, in fact, he referred to everything in God's creation. This was not mere eccentricity. The Bible teaches us many things about animals, including our proper relationship with them. In our Call to Worship this morning, Psalm 8, we thanked God for God's care of humankind, that God has given us the stewardship of creation, including the animals. This does not mean that we may use creation in general or animals in particular however we will. In both Exodus and Deuteronomy, God's people are enjoined to treat their animals with consideration: "If you see an animal that is overburdened, you should lighten its load to help it." Proverbs 17:10 says, "The righteous man regards the life of his beast." The Bible reminds us that there are things so apparent in nature that the animals know them and we would be wise to learn. I mentioned last week Job's rebuke in chapter 12 to his friends who thought themselves wise. Later in that chapter, Job says, "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being." The Psalmist also commented on how the animals understand the grace of God: "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works."

Like us, the animals are a part of God's creation. The Bible and Francis would tell us that they recognize God's lordship even when humans do not. They are made of the same stuff as us and by the same hand. The first chapter of Genesis tells how God brought forth birds and fish and beasts and humankind from the ground of the earth and how God called all good. The Hispanic

theologian, Justo Gonzalez, puts it this way: “What the narrator in Genesis is saying is not only that humankind is made out of the ground, and that this is good, but also that all other living things are made out of the ground, and that this too is good. We are all kindred, and that is good.”

The first of the two scriptures I read this morning also comes from Genesis. In the aftermath of the great flood, God makes a promise to Noah, a promise that never again will the Earth suffer such a catastrophic deluge. As a sign of the promise, God puts his bow in the sky, hanging up his power of destruction. Every Christian, Jewish and Muslim child knows this story and, I suspect, so do many children raised outside of faith communities. But we often overlook one key aspect of God’s promise. Over and over again in that ancient text, God’s promise is given not just to humankind but to all living creatures, to all flesh. It is a powerful reminder that, in the eyes of the Creator, we human beings are just one part of the Creation, along with the birds, the fish and the animals that Francis called brother and sister.

Whether you understand Genesis literally or metaphorically, the more we learn about the science of biology, the more we see how very much we are made of the same stuff as the animals, how we both suffer from damage to our environment, how the loss of species adversely impacts humanity. And like the beasts whom we are enjoined to relieve of their burdens, we are promised relief from our burdens by a loving and suffering God. Jesus said, “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.” Justo Gonzalez also recalls that Jesus spoke of the birds and the flowers and promised his disciples that “your Father” who watched over those little things would also watch over them. Gonzalez suggests that we stop thinking of our caring God as just “our” Father who cares for us more than the sparrows and instead consider “that the sparrow is a child of the same Parent as we are, who takes care of both the sparrow and us.” Since we are called to love our brothers and sisters as we love ourselves, are we not then called to love the birds and the beasts and all of God’s creation in the same way?

In the stories of Francis and the animals, we also find beautiful illustrations of the Spirit, who moved in Francis to make him write, “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.” Francis’ follower and friend, Thomas of Celano, wrote three books on Francis after Francis’ death, stories of his life and the miracles that Thomas saw him perform. Here is a translation from one of them:

“Perhaps the most famous story of Francis is when he tamed the wolf that was terrorizing the people of Gubbio. While Francis was staying in that town he learned of a wolf so ravenous that it was not only killing and eating animals, but people, too. The people took up arms and went after it, but those who encountered the wolf perished at its sharp teeth. Villagers became afraid to leave the city walls.

“Francis had pity on the people and decided to go out and meet the wolf. He was desperately warned by the people, but he insisted that God would take care of him. A brave friar and several peasants accompanied Francis outside the city gate. But soon the peasants lost heart and said they would go no farther.

“Francis and his companion began to walk on. Suddenly the wolf, jaws agape, charged out of the woods at the couple. Francis made the Sign of the Cross toward it. The power of God caused the wolf to slow down and to close its mouth.

“Then Francis called out to the creature: “Come to me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Christ, I order you not to hurt anyone.” At that moment the wolf lowered its head and lay down at Francis’ feet, meek as a lamb.

“Francis explained to the wolf that he had been terrorizing the people, killing not only animals, but humans who are made in the image of God. “Brother Wolf,” said Francis, “I want to make peace between you and the people of Gubbio. They will harm you no more and you must no longer harm them. All past crimes are to be forgiven.”

“The wolf showed its assent by moving its body and nodding its head. Then to the absolute surprise of the gathering crowd, Francis asked the wolf to make a pledge. As Francis extended his hand to receive the pledge, so the wolf extended its front paw and placed it into the saint’s hand. Then Francis commanded the wolf to follow him into town to make a peace pact with the townspeople. The wolf meekly followed Francis.

“By the time they got to the town square, everyone was there to witness the miracle. With the wolf at his side, Francis gave the town a sermon on the wondrous and fearful love of God, calling them to repent from all their sins. Then he offered the townspeople peace, on behalf of the wolf. The townspeople promised in a loud voice to feed the wolf. Then Francis asked the wolf if he would live in peace under those terms. He bowed his head and twisted his body in a way that convinced everyone he accepted the pact. Then once again the wolf placed its paw in Francis’ hand as a sign of the pact.

“From that day on the people kept the pact they had made. The wolf lived for two years among the townspeople, going from door to door for food. It hurt no one and no one hurt it. Even the dogs did not bark at it. When the wolf finally died of old age, the people of Gubbio were sad. The wolf’s peaceful ways had been a living reminder to them of the wonders, patience, virtues and holiness of Francis. It had been a living symbol of the power and providence of the living God.”

As with the stories in Genesis, it is possible to hear this story literally or metaphorically. Franciscan Brother Didacus Wilson in a recent article pointed out that the wolf could also be understood to be the archetypical “*il lupo*,” the murderer and thief. This destructive impulse lurks in the heart of every human, controlled to a greater extent by some and a lesser extent by others. To achieve real peace, we must seek reconciliation with even this aspect of human life, both in ourselves and others. We must learn to forgive the wolf when he appears and offer those driven by the spirit of hate the opportunity to live in peace and community. Even to ourselves, when we are driven by powers of destruction, we must offer love and acceptance. This is not only the lesson of Francis and the wolf of Gubbio, but also the lesson of our Amish brothers and sisters during the past tragic week in Pennsylvania. It would be easy for them in their isolated, insular community to simply draw closer to each other and further from outsiders, rejecting all efforts at communication with the outside world. Instead, they have reached out to the family of

the man who slaughtered their innocents, because in their own words, it is what Jesus would do. Brother Didacus would say that they have followed “Francis’ invitation to be... reconciler(s) in a world often torn by anger, violence and despair.”

In his life, Francis offered peace to wolves of other kinds as well. The time of Francis was also the time of the Crusades. Then, as now, the clash between at least nominally Christian nations and the followers of Islam was a military endeavor, with much blood shed on both sides. In 1219, Francis went to the Holy Land to preach to the Moslems. He was given a pass through the enemy lines, and spoke to the Sultan, Melek-al-Kamil. Francis preached the Gospel to the Sultan, who was deeply impressed by Francis’ faith and sincerity but remained unconverted. Francis proposed an armistice between the two warring sides, and drew up terms for one; the Sultan agreed, but, to Francis’s deep disappointment, the leaders of the Christian armies would not. What would the impact of Francis be now, I wonder, as armies sent to the Middle East to protect a supposedly “Christian civilization” are once again locked in a seemingly endless struggle with those who use the Islamic faith as a cover for violence?

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” As followers of Jesus, we claim the promise that we are God’s children, joint-heirs with Christ to the Kingdom of God. Doesn’t this mean that we must be peacemakers in order to live up to the gift of adoption by God? Jesus taught us to pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God. The prophet Isaiah told us just what it would look like to live in that Beloved Community. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.” This was the vision of Isaiah, the vision of Our Lord Jesus and the vision of Brother Francis. It is now our part, as the Body of Christ in this place, to work for peace with ourselves, each other and with all humankind. It is our part to work with the Holy Spirit towards the redemption of all God’s Creation, to be brothers and sisters to the birds and the beasts and to the Earth itself. We must join with all the creatures of our God and King to praise God who has showered us with all the good gifts of life. We must praise God not only with our voices but also with our actions. Now is the time to be instruments of peace, to sow love and pardon, faith, hope, light and joy. Now is the time to follow the example of Jesus, to set aside our own needs for consolation, understanding and love and to go to the world saying, “Hear the Good News! We offer love and understanding in the name of our God. We offer freedom and healing in the name of Jesus.” The world is waiting, again, always, for those who, like Francis, will offer peace to all Creation. May the power of the Holy Spirit move in all of us and take us into our world to embrace our brothers and sisters in the name of Christ. Amen.