

Today we celebrate the Feast day of St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals. He lived in the 1200s, and was the son of a wealthy Italian merchant. It was the time of the Crusades and the plague. He grew up in a wealthy family and enjoyed all the privileges that wealth and status could provide a young man at that time. He wasn't particularly religious.

When Assisi was attacked by another city state he went to battle to fight for his city. He was captured and imprisoned for a year. It was during his imprisonment that he had a conversion experience, renounced his affluent place in society and sought to live a life of poverty, preaching the gospel and bringing healing to those on the margins of society. It was during his time of deprivation in prison that he began to realize that there was more to life than his own desires for pleasure and status in society. It was during his time in prison that he began to hear Christ speaking to him. Francis became known for his efforts to promote peace following Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself. He began to live the passage that we heard from Paul's letter to the Philippians this morning. Francis asked the Lord to *Help me do nothing from selfish ambition or deceit, but in humility regard people with honor and look to the interests of others. Francis asked that, the mind of Christ be in me: not to attain status but to empty myself and take the place of a servant, trusting your presence in my humanity. May I become obedient in self-giving. May Christ rule my life in grace. May my humility, love and service be your glory.*¹

As Francis ministered to those on the margins of society, the lepers and the poor, he also preached the gospel. Because he was dressed and acted like a beggar, people derided him and ridiculed him as he preached. He was brought before the religious authorities of his day and asked, "*By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?*" (Matthew 21.23) Francis insisted that it was through Christ's Spirit working through him that he was able to preach and minister to those on the margins of society. Francis sought out the leper colonies living on the outskirts of villages as he traveled.

A medieval painting has him preaching to the birds. So the idea of Francis of Assisi preaching to the animals has come down to us today. What we don't realize is that in the symbolism of the time, the birds in the painting represent the lepers and the poor that Francis ministered to in his daily life. The painting was not meant to be taken literally, but was symbolically portraying Francis ministry to the outcasts of society. However, it helped to tame the message and life of Francis if the church could portray him, not as the reformer and healer that he was, but as someone who loved animals. Francis' radical poverty and openness to working for reconciliation and peace among all people was difficult even for those who wanted to follow in his way of life. Francis worked for world peace by going to Jerusalem and meeting with the Sultan. He met with the Pope, this was not your quiet Francis of the bird bath. Francis believed that all of God's creation reflected the Creator's love. All of creation shone forth with the grandeur of God, as he proclaimed in his Canticle of the Sun.

¹ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, 9/29/17, www.unfoldinglight.net

Francis treated all of creation as holy. Because he lived out of a deep connection with Christ, animals were attracted to him.

Many legends arose around Francis and his love of animals. There is the story of the wolf that was terrorizing a small town. Francis found the wolf at the edge of the town and as the wolf charged him he made the sign of the cross and told the wolf to come, he wanted to speak with it. The wolf came and sat at Francis' feet. Francis told the wolf that he needed to stop attacking the animals and people of the town. He understood that the wolf was hungry and told him that as long as he did not attack the town's people or their animals that the people would feed the wolf. For the next two years until his death the wolf visited the town daily to be fed and then disappeared back into the woods around the town.

Today we have what is known as the **St Francis Syndrome**. This is what happens if one just sits quietly in the woods and has a deer, a rabbit, a squirrel, a fox or even as I had one time, a black snake come up very close to you. I drew the limit at the snake I got up and walked away. It also occurs if one sits quietly in meditative prayer and your dog or cat comes and curls up at your feet or in your lap. Animals are drawn to us when we are quiet. They know when we are following the instruction to "be still and know that I am God." (Ps 46:10) Our companion animals reflect the unconditional love of God to us.

Kuma, my therapy dog, gives those he encounters at ODU unconditional love. He has helped grow the campus ministry because the students come to Canterbury Center looking for him, then they stay to talk with me and the other students. When Kuma has visited Alzheimer's patients they will tell him their stories even though they will not speak to another person. Animals give us comfort when we are ill or grieving. They show us God's unconditional love. I'm sure the animals that gathered around Francis felt that same unconditional love emanating from Francis. Francis lived the Lord's command to love God and love your neighbor as yourself, whom ever that neighbor may be.

Francis lived Paul's command to the Philippians to, *do nothing from selfish ambition or deceit, but in humility regard people with honor and look to the interests of others.*²

Turning to p. 833 in your Prayer Book, let us pray the **Prayer of St Francis** together this morning, asking Christ that we may pour ourselves out for Christ in our daily lives as Francis did in his and by doing so find Christ working through us.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

² Ibid.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

St Francis' Feast Day gives us the opportunity to thank God for our companion animals who love us and show us God's unconditional love through their very being. May we reflect that love to all those we meet as well.