

In the name of the most high Trinity, and holy Unity: + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.¹

Tomorrow is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi. And as a Franciscan friar in the Episcopal Church, I've been asked to share a few thoughts about one of the most beloved saints of the Western Church, St. Francis.

Francis was born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone. But, he's better known by the nickname his father gave him, Francesco. Or in English Francis. Francesco means something like Frenchman, since his father had several business trips in France and loved all things French. When Francesco was born, nobody was named Francis. But, because he was so popular, it soon became one of the most common names in Europe.

I could probably just mention Francis of Assisi, and thoughts and images come to mind. Francis did lots of different, amazing ministries in his life. But, I have a sneaking suspicion that at some level a specific image is coming to mind. An image of a bunch of animals surrounding a man in a brown robe (much like the brown habit I'm wearing). This popular, beloved image of Francis with animals is well-founded.

In fact, there are stories of Francis with animals. He famously preached to a flock of birds, entreating them to praise their Creator by their flight and song. He cared for and nurtured a rabbit that had been caught in a trap. And he negotiated peace between a wolf and the town of Gubbio, Italy, on the understanding that the wolf would not kill any more townspeople in exchange for daily food.

Those are all stories, and they may have some legendary character. But historically, we know, on Christmas Eve 1223 Francis brought live oxen and donkeys for the first creche scene. He was serving as deacon and preacher at that midnight mass, and he wanted everyone to experience in a new, vivid way the incarnation of Christ. And that reality of the birth of Jesus includes real animal sounds and real animal smells. Francis wanted to remind everyone viscerally of that real life that Christ came into as they celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas.

¹ Taken from the Trinitarian Formula at the beginning of the *Rule of 1223*.

And, of course, later today we're going to have a blessing of the animals in honor of Francis as we do every year.

But, there's a bit more to St. Francis than just his love of animals. In fact, his relationship with animals is symptomatic of his deeper love and understanding of all of God's creation. He wrote a poem, the Canticum of the Creatures. In it he praises God through all of God's creation and sees the creator behind the creation, like seeing an artist through their art.

8:00: At the 10:30 service, we will sing a popular paraphrase of this canticum in the hymn "All creatures of our God and King".

10:30: Later, we will sing a popular paraphrase of this canticum in our recessional hymn "All creatures of our God and King".

Francis prays in this canticum, "Praised be you, my Lord, through all your creatures"², and then he goes through a laundry list of the created order: sun, moon, stars, water, fire, earth, wind, weather, fruit, vegetation. For Francis and for many others, God's presence is palpably sensed all over creation, as if his fingerprints could be seen and identified just by looking out at the natural world. In the words of Francis's poem creation "bears a likeness of [God, the] Most High One".

In fact, I think our epistle reading today from Hebrews is a good lens to look at the particularly Franciscan view of creation and the impact of the incarnation on our lives.

These next several weeks we're going to be hearing from the Book of Hebrews. It is a deeply philosophical and theological book. And it makes lots of nuanced and specific arguments about who Jesus Christ is in reference to the Old Testament. It can be a very difficult book to read and sift through. But, it is also one of my favorites books of the Bible, because there are lots of wonderful treasures and gems throughout it. So, I want to spend just a few moments with what our reading from Hebrews is telling us today, especially a few highlights in light of the life and example of St. Francis.

² All quotes and excerpts from St. Francis of Assisi's "Canticum of the Creatures" are taken from the translation in *The Daily Office SSF* for the Society of St. Francis.

The Book of Hebrews starts off poetically telling us that in ages past, God sent his message through the prophets. But then it turns. That since then, God has come directly to us in the person of Jesus Christ who is God's direct image. God's perfect imprint lived as one of us, among us. The incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity in the material world, changes and centers our relationship with the entire created order.

Jesus. Incarnation. God living among us.

It sounds a lot like Christmas, doesn't it? Sounds like we need to start singing "Hark the Herald Angels sing" or something. And to be fair, this first section of our Hebrews reading is one of the options for Christmas Eve. For Francis the incarnation is something wonderful to be celebrated at Christmas. He did invent the creche scene after all. But, Francis also understood that the incarnation is also central to our understanding of creation and our life as humans. God's presence and fingerprints are sensed from creation as a whole, and that is beautiful and wonderful, but in the person of Jesus we see God directly. Jesus doesn't bear a likeness of God, he is the likeness of God, the imprint and perfect image of God in the world. God, the immaterial creator of all, takes on our materiality out of love, out of a desire to be in close relationship with his creation.

The incarnation of God in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth is, thus, the capstone, the highest metaphorical peak, of all of creation. The transcendent God of the universe who created everything came into and took on his creation and dwells with us at our own level.

However, the incarnation of Christ doesn't mean that Jesus stays beyond the difficulties of life. God, in Christ, embraces all of life, the good and the bad. As the author of Hebrews explains, "we do see Jesus [...] now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." Jesus suffered crucifixion. He died a grueling, painful death. Jesus came to teach and heal, and we put him on a cross. And you might think he would be bitter towards us. (To be honest, I probably would be.)

But, our reading from Hebrews ends on a reassuring note and message. We all have the same Father, the creator of all. Nothing too shocking there, but just wait. We all have the same Father, the creator of all. And, Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.

Whoa! That is amazing.

Let me say that again: Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.

Let that really sink in: Jesus, the Lord of all Creation, the Second Person of the Trinity, through whom all things have existence, is not ashamed to call us his siblings, his family.

Now, our Hebrews reading does spell out some of the trepidation we might feel about God and our seeming unworthiness toward the divine. Hebrews quotes Psalm 8 and wonders "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" Who are we really, that God cares for us? But the answer comes that we are God's own beloved creation, and God loves us unconditionally.

God loves everyone, beyond all possible human measure.

God loves you. God loves this you, not some fictitious you. Not some idealized you made up of the wouldas, or the couldas, or the shouldas in life. No; God loves this real you. The real you who has lived and experienced life with all of the joys and sorrows that life brings. And Christ is not ashamed to call this real you his brother, his sister.

Where the rubber hits the road for St. Francis, and for us, is how do we respond to Christ's love for us. Christ loves us enough to die for us. How do we in turn share that love? Francis writes in that same Canticle of the Creatures:

"Praised be you, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace:
for by you, Most High, shall they be crowned."

God is praised and worshipped as we love and care for others, just as God in Jesus Christ has loved and continues to love and care for us.

Francis throughout his life and ministry had clear expectations for those in his religious orders. Franciscans were and are supposed to be brothers and sisters of all people, especially those at the margins of society.

But, the question turns to all of us: How do we treat others? Do we act like everyone really is a child of God? Do we love and care for them as our own brothers and sisters? Or, as our baptismal covenant poses it, "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?"

That is a hard standard to live up to. But, this is what the example of St. Francis calls us to. And, more importantly, this is what the love of Jesus calls us to. But, with God's help, we will.

May God give us grace to joyfully share this brotherly, sisterly, sibling love with all we meet.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.