

St Francis; Blessing the (Stuffed) Animals

Sermon 10-7-07

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So we have blessed the animals. I love animals! Most of us do, at least certain animals, but we have learned that we need them *all*, even the spiders, to maintain the balances in nature that sustain the whole (I won't *even* tell you how many critters are living on and in your own body right now, mostly necessary...). Through animals, we connect deeply to nature, to our nature as animals ourselves, and to the basics of spiritual existence. When my cat curls up next to me and leans in, I feel the deep trust, and familial affection, and sensual comfort of our two animal natures affirmed, and I experience a deepening of peace. When I hear the birds chirping in the garden outside my bedroom window, I am calmed in my depths; all is well, life is happening. The beauty and grace of wild birds bring the miraculous to my attention, and *I* am graced with gratitude and appreciation. And we humans love stories, both myths and factual truth, about animals; we see ourselves in them. I love *Coyote Tales*, a book of stories from the Navajo tradition, and *Black Beauty*, and *The Wind in the Willows*, *Lassie*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Whale Rider*, *Eragon*... and on and on. My son Daniel loves to watch Animal Planet, and the Discovery Channel. What are your favorite animal stories?... I am

pleased we are honoring animals, they are integral to “the interconnected web of life of which we are a part”, and they connect us with our essential nature.

To celebrate the Feast of St Francis, which is October 4, Christian churches sometimes perform a blessing of the animals (and usually they invite the live animals, but somehow I wasn't up to the chaos; there is a great Vicar of Dibley episode from the BBC...). How do you picture St Francis? For me, he comes to mind as a simple monk devoted to poverty as expression of devotion, and whose kind-heartedness extended to all creatures; we can picture a statue in the garden of a man in a plain robe with a sparrow perching on his hand. There is a Franciscan Renewal Center with just such a statue in Paradise Valley here, and the monks there have long brown robes (I know a couple of the Friars, and they also have suit and tie, or T-shirt and shorts, as the occasion demands). I am not a scholar, but with borrowed books and the internet I have researched the life of this remarkable man. I was struck that only the first biographer actually knew him, and his was written in the style of the time, aiming at message rather than accuracy. Let us examine the mythology of St Francis and his legacy to us as liberal religionists.

Giovanni Di Bernardone was born in Assisi, Italy, almost 1000 years ago, in 1181. His mother had him christened Giovanni in honor of St John the Baptist, in hopes of his becoming a great religious leader. His father, a wealthy businessman, was away at the time of his birth; upon his return he was infuriated at that idea, and insisted upon calling the baby Francesco, in honor of the mother's French origins. In English we're accustomed to calling him Francis.

Francis spent his youth lost in books, and became known as a young man as a 'party animal', he loved to carouse and feast with his friends. He had a generous heart, and had a tendency toward impulsive displays of charity (like giving his entire purse to a beggar), which annoyed his father immensely. He spent time as a soldier and a year as a prisoner of war, and I imagine this had a profound effect on his spiritual life. Though he returned safely to Assisi in 1203, he then suffered a serious illness which finally precipitated a spiritual crisis, deepened by strange visions.

Disillusioned with the world of the wealthy, Francis began avoiding his friends and feasts and sought lonely places to meditate, asking God for

enlightenment. Francis was essentially a man of action, so he began to care for lepers, and on a pilgrimage to Rome, he begged house to house for the poor. The culmination of this period of seeking was a mystical experience in a local church; Francis saw the icon of Christ telling him to “go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling in ruins.” He took the message literally and began by assisting the priest of that church to repair it, selling his horse and some of his father’s goods to raise money. There are several versions of this story; in one, his father was so indignant about this that he threatened Francis, and then beat him. In a final confrontation in the presence of the bishop, the young Francis responded by renouncing his father and his patrimony, stripping off even the clothes he was wearing, on the spot. Standing for his principles, he became a beggar.

Francis spent the next couple of years immersed in that embodied, kinesthetic approach to faith, restoring several ruined churches. In 1209, he heard a sermon which inspired him to devote himself wholly to a life of poverty, and barefoot, began to preach repentance. He attracted a small group of followers, and they established a simple religious community together, as “fratres minores”; lesser brothers. In 1209 he was granted permission from Pope Innocent III to found it as a new religious order. In

1211 he received Clare of Assisi and they established the Order of the Poor Dames, later known as the Poor Clares. Francis never became a priest. New friars received something like one robe, one hood, one pair of sandals, one length of rope to tie around their waist, and one traveling cloak. They were sent out in pairs with no money, begging for food and shelter, and preaching, all over Italy, France, Germany, Hungary, Spain, and the East, establishing monasteries. Some of Francis' correspondence urges priests to keep the churches clean and tend to holy objects with great care. On one pilgrimage of non-violence in 1219 to Egypt, Francis crossed the lines between the Crusaders and the sultan, simply walking across the battlefield, unharmed, and was received by the sultan, who apparently was mightily impressed with his preaching, though he did not go so far as to convert.

St Francis is responsible for setting up the first known crèche, or Nativity scene, at Christmas, using a real ox and donkey, so that worshipers could contemplate the birth of Jesus in a direct way. The straw-filled manger was used as the altar for the mass.

Brother Francis loved to spend time in the natural world seeking communion with God. The mountain of La Verna was given to him by a rich benefactor,

which became a favorite retreat for prayer. While there on a 40-day fast in 1224, Francis received the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ; this is the first definite account of such a phenomenon. He suffered from these wounds and other illnesses, and finally died in 1226, singing Psalm 141. The story is that on his deathbed he thanked his donkey for having carried him, and the donkey wept. He was pronounced a saint in 1228 by Pope Gregory IX.

Legends grew up around this humble man. It is said that while traveling with his companions, he came upon a place in the road where the trees were filled with birds. He preached to the birds, “My sister birds, you owe much to God, and you must always and in everyplace give praise to Him; for He has given you freedom to wing through the sky and He has clothed you... the Creator loves you greatly and He blesses you abundantly. Therefore... always seek to praise God.”

One of my favorite stories is that he came to a village that was terrorized by a wolf, and so he sought the fierce beast in the forest, and finding him, made the sign of the cross and gave him a lecture. The wolf then lay down peacefully at his feet. He asked the wolf to stop doing evil, and to accompany him to the village to make peace. He got the townspeople and

the wolf to make a covenant of peace; the people would feed the wolf, and the wolf would cease to prey on them and their flocks. Even the village dogs entered the covenant to cease bothering the wolf.

Francis was not much of a writer, he was more of a doer, so we do not have a lot of writings from him. His famous prayer is the Canticle of the Sun, also known as the Canticle of the Creatures; our meditation hymn today was adapted from this. Part of the translation from the original Umbrian goes like this, “Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness. Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens you have made them, precious and beautiful. Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance. Be praised, My Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

Now, I am no Christian, I never have been. But I am a believer in great teachers, and in stories as necessary to the human psyche, and I am

becoming more and more curious about mysticism. So St Francis intrigues me, and speaks to me through his themes of peaceful rebellion, of loving kindness and gratitude, of simplicity, and of nature and ourselves as embodiment of the sacred and mystical.

St Francis felt connected to animals and the world of nature, and often retreated to nature to reconnect with God. This can be seen as a departure from the general practice of the times. I am not a philosopher or a historian, but I am told that this is the first time that Christian thought really departs from that old Greek, Platonic, philosophical concept of dualism: that the world is divided into spirit and matter, and matter is of course inferior to spirit. But our friend Brother Francis sees the divine in the natural world around him, sees the Spirit in his fellow humans. He doesn't fear the sultan's soldiers, nor does he try to kill the sultan, he speaks to him of God. He even speaks to the birds of God. He experiences the world, and his spirituality, very much in his body; he picks up the blocks of stone to repair the church, he asks us to attend to the dirt on the altar, he walks through the mountains barefoot with nothing to eat, to preach. He goes to the mountain to find peace, to commune with God, to receive his mystical experience, and it is expressed in his body.

Brother Francis has a unified experience, present in his body and his senses, he receives the experience of the divine. He does not condemn nature as tainted or earthly and therefore separated from the divine, he experiences the divine through nature. Brother Sun and Sister moon are extensions of God, blessing us.

I am probably an atheist, but I experience something which could be called the divine, in nature. Many of us do. Some of these Arizona sunsets really can take your breath away. The power of a desert monsoon storm, filled with crashes of powerful thunder, magnificent lighting, and the pouring out of that precious precious rain, filling the charged air with that particular desert rain fragrance, *this* can capture the attention of your inner being. Two weeks ago as I approached the church for an evening meeting, a giant, round, translucent pink moon was just rising above the horizon. I had to stop and drink it in, let it nourish my soul.

And animals are examples of the outrageous, miraculous variety and ingenuity and genius of nature, Spirit of Life, the Force... How each feather with it's seemingly random mottled coloring comes together with other

feathers to create the precise checkerboard pattern on a guinea fowl. Or a sand hill crane and a tiny hummingbird can find their way to migrate over thousands of miles, to find the same places for nesting, every year. Or that *millions* of different creatures, some of whom we haven't even met yet, interact and co-exist and co-create the environment with the plant world in a tropical rainforest, -each with it's own niche.

I walked at dusk along the Rillito River near my house in Tucson the other night, so I could absorb the rosy light, and delight in the little bats who seem to have no heads, darting after the insects (go get 'em!), and the nighthawks too, more graceful... Hoping to see coyote slinking along the dry riverbed amongst the brush as I have once or twice, or a snake moving amongst the prickly pear. Do you know that that fuzzy white stuff that looks like mold on prickly pear pads is made by a tiny animal, and it yields crimson dye, which enriched the Spanish explorers far more than any gold they found in the New World? ...And further down the path, there is a stable, where the barnyard fragrance always reminds me of my grandparents' farm, and the deep, personal, daily connection to nature and the love of human beings we kids always found there, and the sense of being blessed to be on the planet,

and blessed by the planet. We kids secretly dug up carrots from the garden, washed them in the hose, and crunched on them, delicious buried treasure.

St Francis felt that we get distracted by possessions and trying to get on in the world, and in the process do harm to ourselves and others. For him, I imagine that stripping down to the barest of essentials freed him to focus on the spirit, to demonstrate his trust that God would provide, and to celebrate the spirit everywhere he saw it. He felt his divine connection with the sparrows in the trees and with his donkey who carried him and with the ox who stood by the newborn in the manger who would show us a new relationship to God. In the story he honored the needs of the wolf and of the village people and sought the solution for them to live in harmony. And I feel sisterhood with Brother Francis for that. In your hymnal on one of the first pages, the seven principles we affirm appear, and below that, the sources of the tradition. The first one is the direct experience of transcendence, and St Francis is a fine teacher of that. 400 years later, the Puritans in America were teaching that the divine can be revealed through any of us, rebels against the hierarchy of the Church of England. 200 years or so after that, Ralph Waldo Emerson was exhorting newly graduating ministers not to get stuck in the Bible but to experience life and the divine

for themselves, and use their own experiences in their sermons as an authentic voice for their congregations. Unitarian Universalism doesn't celebrate saints, but we celebrate great teachers. Whether we are Christians, or not, we can appreciate the power of St Francis's approach to spirituality.