



**A Sermon for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi and
The Blessing of Animals**

October 6, 2024



Rev. Barbara Bond

New Life Episcopal Church, Uniontown, OH

Canticle of the Creatures, Matthew 11:25-30

This has been a Francis of Assisi world the past few days, hasn't it? The wonderful weather, encouraging us to walk, breathe in the beauty, enjoy the riches of the landscape. Francis is right beside us as we praise God for the beauty of the earth.

Francis lived 800 years ago, and in many ways he stood the world on its head – rather like Jesus gave us an upside-down world. Francis was totally out of step with his own culture, and he delighted in that. The son of a rich cloth merchant, Francis tried out the normal pastimes of the rich youth of his day – going to war, drinking and carousing, enjoying a comfortable existence – until one day, he didn't. He suddenly realized that all his father's riches were the result of plunder through war pillage, the beautiful fabrics were made by exploiting poor workers, and the existence was vapid and meaningless. Jesus spoke to Francis directly, got his attention one day while Francis was looking at the crucifix in the ruined church of St. Damien, near his home in Assisi, northern Italy. Francis looked into the eyes of the iconic crucified Christ, and suddenly he couldn't face his old life anymore. He looked to nature for his inspiration, embracing the beauty of the earth and all its creatures. He threw away his father's rich fabrics, including the clothes he, Francis, was wearing, and walked away from all of it, stark naked. He wanted to start over, with none of those riches impeding him. He donned a simple brown habit, embraced poverty, and started restoring the ruined church of St. Damien. His rich friends were puzzled by his behavior, but little by little, they joined him and a little band of counter-cultural monks grew up around him, the first Franciscans.

Not only were Francis's parents appalled. So was the Church, with a capital C. The 13th century Church, based in Rome, was the only show in town, so to speak. The Church had no competition until Francis supplied an alternate vision, and it was a little risky to buck the church – a very rich and worldly institution. Francis risked being burned as a heretic, but his path was earnest and truthful and brought the church a new perspective. Somehow the church had gotten away from the ideals of Jesus, the poor carpenter who spread the Good News of love. The church had come to look more like Francis's family with their riches.

Francis's life and his confrontation with the church is demonstrated in one of my favorite movies, "Brother Son, Sister Moon." Allow me to describe the climatic scene. Francis and his band of dirty monks have gone to Rome to see the pope. Not just any pope. Innocent III, one of the grandest popes of the medieval church. In the movie he is played by the great actor Alec Guinness. The real Pope Innocent III had issued a papal bull declaring that the Church was in charge of everyone's salvation – not God, no, the Church! I've always thought that was a little presumptuous. But it made sense in a medieval kind of way. The 13th century church structure was extremely powerful and encrusted with riches. So – back to the movie. Francis and his friends arrive, in their filthy brown habits, and their muddy feet, and walk into a magnificent hall, with richly dressed cardinals on both sides, and Pope Innocent III on a high Dias, wearing a magnificent robe. Behind the pope is a mosaic icon of Jesus Christ, looking pretty imperious and, actually, pretty angry. Perhaps Jesus wasn't too pleased with what his church had become. Francis appeals to the pope, offering a vision of the beautiful earth, quotes Jesus, "consider the lilies of the field, and he offers his simple view of God and God's love. The pope is surprised. He comes down from his high perch, arrives in front of Francis, and admits that the church has probably gone astray; that Francis, with his simple outlook, is closer to God than any of the officials of the church. Innocent says, "In your simple ways, you have put us all to shame." He kneels before Francis, and kisses his dirty feet.

Oh, I hope that really happened! But if it didn't happen literally, the portrayal is accurate in terms of the difference Francis made to the church.

Today we heard Francis's wonderful Canticle of the Creatures, his song of praise to all creation, and we have welcomed creatures to church today, our special guests bringing creation closer. At the close of the service, we will read a beautiful prayer attributed to Francis – its language is certainly in tune with his spirituality. And then we will invite our special guests to come forward for a special blessing, acknowledging that they bless our lives with their presence and companionship. Where would I be without cats? And you, with your own creatures – cats, dogs, horses. We are invited to appreciate all of God's creatures.

By extension, we are invited to love the whole earth. The environmental movement has shown us that we are not always careful in our stewardship of nature and the earth. Stewardship means taking care of things – our pets, our families, our church, the earth and all its creatures. The life of Francis of Assisi is a good reminder that we are not alone on this planet – we are its caretakers. We are called to care for the earth, all its creatures, and especially our fellow human beings. As recent natural disasters have reminded us, we are all in this together.

It has been said that Saint Francis is one of our most admired saints, but probably the least imitated, in his lifestyle of simplicity, generosity and love. Let us adopt the manner of Francis: let us praise God always in our lifestyles; take a walk in the beautiful autumn; make responsible choices in our purchases that impact the earth less (for instance, buy single-use plastic) be kind, be generous, spread love.

I close with a prayer from Ed Hayes, a modern disciple of Jesus and Francis:

“May I think only loving and kind thoughts toward others, even toward those who harm me, and so help create a compassionate world full of your glory and holiness, a world filled with happiness and joy.”