

**New Life Episcopal Church
Uniontown, Ohio**



**Feast of St. Francis of Assisi and
The Blessing of Animals**

**A Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2026**

Preacher: Troy Dunn

[The Cantic of the Creatures - St. Anthony Shrine](#)

Sermon – 800th Anniversary of the Death of St. Francis of Assisi

By Troy Dunn, October 4, 2026

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Back in 2006 I did the unthinkable! I quit my job and I totally liquidated everything I owned! I had the biggest yard sale the neighborhood had ever seen. Sale! Everything goes! And I do mean everything! My house was emptied out. Bare walls and bare floors. I kept some clothes, personal items, and a few boxes of books. I closed up the house, and I was off to San Antonio, Texas to live in a little tiny room with a window, a bed, and a chair. I had entered San Damiano Friary of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual Franciscans as a postulant. Earlier in my life Catholic diocesan seminary did not work out for me, and over the years I had discovered this man, this saint, whom I now wanted to emulate and follow. I had to give up almost everything to pursue this new call. It also meant I had to share everything else living in community where nothing was really yours. Perhaps you've seen evidence of this saintly man in your own life. A picture of a holy man in a brown robe and sandals. A statue in a garden perhaps along with some animals, maybe holding a tray for birdseed, or in a gesture preaching to the birds and other critters of the forest. What was the appeal? What drew him to live in such a way? Why was I then drawn in 2006 to make such a drastic detour in

my own life to live differently and follow in the footsteps of a man who died 800 years ago? Today we celebrate a very special occasion! We commemorate the 800th anniversary of the Transitus of St. Francis from his earthly life to eternal life on Oct. 3, 1226 at the age of 44.

This man, Francis, is one of the most recognized saints in the Western world among people of all faiths and no faith. So, who was Francis the man, and what does he have to teach us? As popular as St. Francis has become in these 800 years I think it is important to separate the man from the myth. Francis was restless, a restless sinner/saint. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone was his name, born in 1182 in Assisi, Northern Italy. His mother wanted to name him Giovanni; however, his father, who had successful business dealings in France and with the French wanted his name instead to honor his connection to France by naming him Francesco, and it stuck! Some suggest that Giovanni (John) was his baptismal name linking him to the ministry of John the Baptist as one heralding the coming of the Lord. As Francis grew and the turn of the century was dawning, Assisi and Northern Italy was prospering and growing in its wealth and the rise of a monied middle class. Once the citizens felt they had been empowered enough they rose up against the ruling nobility at which time the wealthy knightly family of Offreduccio, with their

daughter Chiara (Clare), was driven from their palace and out of the city. It was Clare who became one of the first followers of Francis inspired by his new way of life.

It was during this period of instability that the conversion of Francis began to take root, especially around 1204-1206 when in his early 20's. Francis's father, Pietro Bernardone, was part of this upwardly mobile section of commercial society defined around the pursuit of money and status. Francis had access to that family money, and lived and spent accordingly. He lived like a prince of sorts, not greedy but spent freely. He aspired to knighthood, and enjoyed his own status and upward mobility as a merchant. Yet he was restless. Something just didn't sit right with him. He enjoyed his growing status but he became increasingly discontent with how the pursuit of money was affecting his family, particularly his parents, and society in and around Assisi. As a youth in his teens and early twenties he was known to blow through money haphazardly, and was running around with a gang of companions known to be rabble rousers. Overtime, however, Francis became increasingly uncomfortable with emulating what was happening in Assisi as its very foundations of traditional order were being shaken. This emerging restlessness triggered the rupture between father and son. Francis was also confronted with disillusionment and suffering

through his experiences with those around him (such as local lepers), and war. The conversion of Francis was a long process marked by four distinct crises in his life. First, his discontent with what money and power were doing to Assisi. Second, the simple encounter with a leper – coming face to face with real humanity and real suffering. He was actually moved at one point to dismount his horse and approach a leper and kiss him! Third, war – in 1202 he was a captive in Perugia at age 20 and his desire to be knighted was interrupted. And fourth, his own encounter with illness in 1204 when stricken with fever and broken from the war, he spent a year in bed. This period was followed by encounters with the Lord through dreams, visions, and voices. Through these major hallmarks during his early life Francis was led (or forced) to revise his own view of the world and his sense of self. Tearing himself away from the world, old friends, old habits was long and arduous. He cut the last links to trivial pleasures at a final awakening while amongst his last few companions by declaring, "I am thinking of taking a wife more beautiful, more rich, more pure than you could ever imagine." And with that they went their separate ways. He doubled his charities to the poor and became more aloof from society. Our trials change us. They changed Francis. He ultimately reached a profound turning point in his life. He eventually "renounced the vanities of this world"

as we heard in the collect for today, and we went on to pray that we may “delight in {God’s} whole creation with perfectness of joy.”

Francis became a “new creation” which is everything according to Paul in our Galatians reading. Through our own baptism, when we turn from sin, and renounce vanities we become a new creation, and we choose to live differently. Some of Francis’s companions were eventually inspired to follow his example and become new creations thus accompanying Francis as his first brothers, and later Clare, who was also inspired by the life and preaching of Francis chose to do the same. He received approval of his new order by Pope Innocent III in 1209 consisting of Francis and 11 brothers.

Francis frequented the little crumbling church of San Damiano outside the walls of Assisi. It is recorded that as he prayed before the Umbrian inspired icon crucifix in 1205, which hung in that chapel, the figure of Christ spoke to Francis from that cross saying, “Francis, go and repair my house, which as you see is falling into ruin.” He took this a little too literally as he soon began moving actual stones to make repairs to the physical church. He misunderstood Christ’s directive – not to repair the physical structure of the building but to repair the spiritual church outside of those walls, yet he still made physical repairs to the church. Isn’t this what we are called to do? To go beyond the walls and bring

Christ to others? This moment changed the course of history! The Franciscan movement was born! This cross, which has become widely known as the Franciscan cross, is one of my favorites! I was gifted this one when I left for San Antonio to join the brothers at San Damiano Friary 20 years ago. Painted as an Umbrian inspired icon around the year 1100 A.D., the corpus reflects Christ Triumphant who reigns from the cross rather than just suffering on it. It's meant to hold death and victory together in one image – the Suffering Savior and the Risen Lord. The original is now housed in the Basilica of St. Clare in Assisi.

One of the most familiar of Francis's love was for all of God's creation – his brothers and sisters in Christ, the birds of the air, the critters of the woods, the fish of the sea, the elements of the cosmos. He was known to not only preach to people, but also to the birds and the forest animals. And as we have come to know he has written some wonderful now famous prayers expressing his love for all creatures. His most famous being the Canticle of the Sun, the Peace Prayer, and the Prayer before the Crucifix. Francis was one who saw the Creator most clearly through creation. He was interested in the concrete – he loved people, and wolves, and stars, and Christ. He is credited with the first nativity scene displayed at Greccio in 1223. He received the holy stigmata, the wounds of

Christ, at Mount LaVerna in 1224 on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. One of his friends and supporters, Hugolin, became Pope Gregory IX who later canonized Francis in Assisi July 16, 1228. We are currently in a Franciscan jubilee year proclaimed by Pope Leo. And for the first time in 800 years the relics (remains) of St. Francis was moved from his tomb and put on public display at the foot of the papal altar. Here we are 800 years later with approximately 650,000 Franciscans in 110 countries divided up among friars (35,000), cloistered women (60,000), third order regular religious (155,000), and seculars (400,000) who live a life of simplicity, fraternity, service, and joy all walking in the footsteps of Francis. I too was restless when I decided to go to San Antonio for a year and completely change my way of life all for Jesus living in community in a simple friary with a rhythm of common prayer, mass, meals, study and service. At night we were safe behind the gates and walls of the friary, but by day we were out hitting the pavement taking church beyond the walls.

Many people, especially our youth, are still restless. Today's need for evangelization is not so different, but requires different methods. Pope Leo recently finished his apostolic visit to France where 80,000 youth attended the first night's vigil, and another 800,000 people attending an outdoor Mass. France has recently

witness a surge in conversions, baptisms and confirmations mostly among the Gen Z 18-25 yr olds. This is not the result of an inherited faith. These young people are choosing it. They are restless. The doom scrolling and social media doesn't fulfill. They long for community after a post-Covid world, for rules, for something greater than themselves, for a real encounter with God. And many of them when interviewed about how they learned about the faith (since it's not inherited) the answers included through Tik Tok, Instagram, Podcasts, and all the great content being created by young priests, consecrated brothers and sisters, and lay believers. These are people who wouldn't have walking into a Church on their own. Those providing faith content on various platforms are reaching a whole new generation of digital fluent youth and adults. And because of it they are choosing faith and community and Jesus.

Like Francis 800 years ago, who shed his old life and vanities to follow the Gospel of Jesus, we too are called to the same – maybe not as drastic, but to various degrees of self-denial, charitable works, loving God and his creation, and living out the Gospel. The Church helps us in listing some concrete ways we can live out that Gospel. Specifically, we are called to rebuild the Church in the concrete ways enumerated in the five marks of mission of the church: 1) to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; 2) to teach,

baptize, and nurture new believers; 3) to respond to human need by loving service; 4) to seek to transform unjust structures of society; and 5) to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. Francis responded to all of these missions and I believe here at New Life and within the greater Church we continue to do so, too. St. Augustine writes, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” And Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” May St. Francis continue to inspire us for another 800 years and beyond!

AMEN!