

Sermon for Sunday, October 8, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today we are celebrating the Feast of St Francis.
And it's the day
when we traditionally
give thanks for
our animal friends.

Francis' love for animals
is remembered in the many legends about him.
He is said to have made a pact with a savage wolf
not to harm the people of a town
in exchange for food
and the wolf offered its paw as a sign of agreement.
He supposedly quieted a flock of birds and preached to them;
- they were a good audience and didn't leave
until he said they could.

He was careful not to step on an ant, and tried to have laws made
to provide a "bounteous meal" for all animals on Christmas Day.

Animals
were said to "instinctively surround" him,
becoming so attached to him
that they would repeatedly hop into his lap.

Those are the stories.
But underlying them
is Francis' conviction
that all creation
is united in the praise of God.

The Canticle of the Sun
is one of the most well known things
that Francis wrote.
It's the basis of the hymn
that we sang at the beginning of the service today.
In it
he invites all of creation

to worship God,
 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.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
 and the stars, in heaven you formed them
 clear and precious and beautiful.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
 and through the air, cloudy and serene,
 and every kind of weather through which
 You give sustenance to Your creatures.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
 through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
 and playful and robust and strong.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
 who sustains us and governs us and who produces
 varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.
 But after all the references to creation,
 finally
 Francis comes to human beings.
 And there the focus
 is on us praising God
 by forgiving one another
 and being peace-makers.

Which Francis himself was.
 It was when he was a soldier
 that Francis had the vision
 that led to him renouncing his former life of wealth and privilege.
 Francis prohibited his followers from carrying arms and swearing oaths of allegiance,
 and argued
 that if you didn't have any possessions,
 you had nothing to defend,
 and therefore
 no need
 for weapons.

During the Fifth Crusade, in 1219,
Francis visited the Holy Land.
The Crusaders had just won a major victory.
Francis
sought the blessing of the cardinal who was chaplain to the crusader forces
to go and preach the gospel
to one of Christianity's chief opponents, Sultan Malik-al-Kamil.

The cardinal told him
that the Muslims understood only weapons
and that the one useful thing a Christian could do
was to kill them.
But he let Francis, and his companion Illuminato, go,
albeit convinced
that they were going
to their deaths.
The two left the Crusader encampment singing the twenty third psalm,
"The Lord is my shepherd."

Soon afterwards, they were captured by the Sultan's army,
beaten,
and then brought before Malik-al-Kamil,
who asked if they wished to become Muslims.
Francis replied that they came to seek his conversion.

For a month Francis and the sultan met daily.
He didn't succeed in converting the Sultan, nor vice-versa,
but they developed such a strong relationship,
that the sultan gave Francis and Illuminato a passport
that allowed them to visit Christian holy places under Muslim control.
Eventually the Franciscans
were given control
of many of the holy sites
in the holy land,
and continue to care for them
today.

Back in Italy,
Francis continued to work for peace,

being invited to preach and mediate in local disputes and civil wars,
and bringing peace within families and cities.

This week
we have had yet another mass shooting,
this time in Las Vegas.
I don't need to tell you the details.
We know them all too well.
A man,
a stockpile of guns,
too many
dead.

And once again
there have been calls for gun control.
But I sometimes think
that calling for government action
kind of lets us off the hook.
As if "them" doing something about it
will solve the problem of violence
that is so prevalent in our society.

I happen to support gun control, having grown up in a country
with strict controls.
But even I know
that guns are only
part of the equation.
The other part
is the people
using the guns.

Sometimes the shootings
that have become so much part of life here in the United States
are linked to religious extremism.
More often
to mental illness.
But almost always, it seems,
always
to a sense
of alienation,

a sense of being cut off,
removed,
isolated
from wider society.
Loneliness,
fear,
anger,
all play a part.
And then add to that a culture
that seems to come pretty close
to worshipping violence.
And we're in trouble.

And this is where we
can make a difference.
Not just praying for peace
but working for it.

Building relationships with people
who are different from us.
Reaching out
to people who seem somehow
alienated.
Spending time with people
who are lonely and afraid.
Working against violence
in every form.

That's the big picture.
But there's a small picture too,
the everyday

What about
if you are annoyed with someone
choosing to let it go.
What about
if you don't like someone
praying for them.
What about
if you hear someone say something negative about someone else,

gently reminding them
that as Christians
their call is to love.
Seeking to build relationships,
not to tear them down.

Remember in the beatitudes
in the Sermon on the Mount,
Jesus says,
“Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.”
Not just peace-lovers
but peace makers.

And so, this celebration of the Feast of St Francis,
I invite you
to be peace makers.

And to pray for peace,
to pray the prayer associated with St Francis
that came to public use
during the First World War.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
O Master, let me not seek as much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.