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St. Thomas Church
Feast of St. Francis 10.4.20
Jer. 22:13-16; Gal. 6:14-18;
Matt. 11:25-30

Radical Kinship

This morning we remember and honor one of most loved and best known of Saints, Francis of Assisi who lived in medieval Italy in the 13th century. He is remembered for many things: a rich young man who gave away all of his possessions (and some of his Father's, too), a peacemaker who traveled to Muslim lands, a contemplative who prayed in caves, a man who promoted social and economic justice by insisting that people be treated fairly and as equals, and a nature mystic who preached to birds, talked to wolves, and found God to be magnificently present in Creation.

Francis' intimate relationship with mother earth and all that inhabits her is what I would like to speak to in more depth this morning. Francis' creation-centered ways of understanding things could not be more relevant or needed than during this present hour as we continue to witness the negative consequences of climate change and our lack of wise stewardship of God's creation. Thomas Celano, Francis' earliest biographers said of the saint that, "...he delighted in all of the works of God's hands and from the vision of joy on earth his mind soared aloft to the life-giving source and cause of it all. In everything he saw [God] who is beauty itself and he followed his Beloved everywhere by his likeness imprinted on all creation."

So, in other words, the entire universe, all of the created order, was pure joy to Francis, a manifestation of God's generosity and diversity, an original and on-going blessing, and a gift that was unearned and to be treasured and shared. This is the heart of creation-centered spirituality. Francis believed that all of creation—the birds, the reptiles, the dogs, the cats, the humans of every race—were mirrors that reflected the divine image and therefore should be revered like the most exquisitely painted icon in a cathedral—perhaps even more so.

I am suspecting that many of you are saying at this point—well of course this sounds nice—maybe a little overly romantic or even sentimental— thanks Father Steve for the annual reminder to treat the household pets a little better or see if the stature of Francis in the flower bed is still standing upright. But Francis and his

movement has always been so much more. The robust river of creation-centered spirituality that Francis regularly swam in was deep, dangerous and radically transformative. Like Jesus, Francis too, has always had many admirers and far fewer followers.

Francis and his followers did not invent creation-centered spirituality. The beauty of it is that it is too diverse to be considered as having been “invented” by any one faith or person. Its roots run deep into our human history and resonates with the wisdom literature of sacred scripture (especially the psalms but also less obvious places like the Book of Job) and the creation-centered traditions of many indigenous cultures that survive to this day.

In fact, at this very moment, native peoples in our state of Washington are advocating mightily for the preservation and reclamation of the Salmon runs in both eastern and western Washington. Acting on ancient wisdom, they know that the Salmon runs are a major component—and health indicator—of ecosystem of our region. As one native American activist put it, “As Indigenous people, we have always had the responsibility of maintaining stewardship and environmental protection of all of our resources. We are taught since a young age that we must leave this Earth better than it was given to us. Our songs and dances come from living beings. That’s our heritage. If we lose the salmon or orcas, we will lose a part of who we are and break the natural circle of life.”

In today’s gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus also speaks to the issue of wisdom. Jesus offers a prayer of thanksgiving to his Creator for keeping true wisdom hidden from those who think they are wise and intelligent. At first this doesn’t seem to make sense. Why would God want to keep wisdom hidden? Part of the answer is the context of Jesus’ prayer. In the preceding passages in Chapter 11, we see in both the prophetic messages of John the Baptist and Jesus is the calling for repentance. Proud peoples and cities were turning their backs from Jesus’ new teachings and creation-centered wisdom.

Jesus was calling the people to turn away from practices that prevent radical kinship and intimate relationship with those parts of creation that are not often loved: the blind, the poor, the captives, the lepers, the forgotten. Receiving Jesus’ wisdom begins with the turning away from everything that separates and divides others, preventing the unconditional love of God from entering human hearts. It is the affirmation of turning toward and embracing the wisdom that we are all interdependent—what helps one helps all, what hurts one hurts all—that we are all valued and are all part of the spiritual ecosystem of God. So, in this way, Jesus is

thankful that if we are to see and incorporate true wisdom, we will need to do something, see something, be something new.

Today's gospel lesson points us to a type of spiritual wisdom that is revealed to infants. From a Franciscan or creation-centered lens this makes perfect sense. An infant instinctively knows that to be in relationship—to be held, to be nursed, to be gently rocked to sleep is a place where one feels most deeply at home and, at peace, and connected to something or someone larger than oneself. The stories of Francis' life often talk about his ability to make and find a home and a family wherever he travelled—under a bridge, in a dark cave, coffee with the Sultan, eating an apple under a tree with a goat, or in the Vatican having dinner with the Pope.

For Francis, this was true wisdom. For wherever he traveled—wherever possible—he sought the bonds of kinship that united him with every creature on earth and when he felt connected, he had indeed arrived home to find Jesus as host and his burdens lightened. I believe that this is the wisdom that Jesus is talking to us today about. That in the context of his call to connect and glue back together the moving and broken parts of creation together, he was calling us back to kinship and family where true rest, true security, and true peace can be found and where the burdens of judgment, separation, and hurt are lightened.

As a spiritual practice I like to ask myself this time of year is “Where are the places that Francis would have likely wanted to travel to if he were here?” It's a little tough to imagine because of the pandemic. But as soon as it's safer, my top pick is the Greenbelt Arts Festival that has been happening annually in England for almost 50 years. It is a radically inclusive festival which includes music, visual and performing arts, spirituality, comedy, and discussion about faith, social justice, and activism. A former patron of this festival is none other than the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Many in this amazing group of diverse but kindred souls have a stated goal of re-imagining Christianity as a place where kinship with all of creation is sought, pursued, and celebrated.

As an illustration of how powerful grassroots movements can be, a few years ago, activists from the Greenbelt festival began a Big Shift campaign calling for UK banks to end their financing of fossil fuels and to shift their priorities to funding renewable energy projects and businesses. Voices present at this initiative were first order Franciscan brothers and sisters of the Anglican church with tee-shirts and signs that read, “Don't be a Fossil Fool,” “Kick the Carbon Habit,” “It's our

children's future." It's this last slogan that reaches the deepest part of my heart. What kind of a world will we left behind for our children and grandchildren?

I am pleased to report that the environmental activism has paid off. In the first half of 2020 Lloyds of London, the Royal Bank of Scotland and other major UK banks have already made major commitments to move in the direction of defunding investors and businesses not committed to reducing carbon emissions.

So dear brothers and sisters, I invite you during this season of stewardship to think about the whole of creation. As a part of my connecting the dots, our household is in the process of applying for a reduction in our auto insurance premium based on less commuting this past year. Not only is our family pleased to be creating less carbon emissions this year, but we will be passing on the premium savings as part of our pledge to St. Thomas. May all of us imagine ways, in the spirit of Francis of Assisi, to look for youthful wisdom that leads to the creative practice of the radical kinship of God." Amen.