

BISHOP'S MESSAGE – October 2017

Aloha o ke Akua,

In the Episcopal Church's liturgical calendar, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) is observed on October 4th. In many of our churches, the day will include the blessing of pets. This is a quaint custom that I find has little to do with St. Francis. As a parish priest in Indiana, my congregation annually hosted such blessings for the community in the parking lot of a veterinarian's clinic on a major road. We provided treats for the pets and their owners. These services can encourage pastoral connection for many people. Frankly, however, I'm not keen on such blessings on Sunday mornings (or at other major weekend liturgies). Why? Pastorally, some people have allergies and some are afraid of animals. Having these "St. Francis" blessings (especially inside a church) at Sunday liturgies excludes some of the Body of Christ from the fellowship worship. Theologically, I also think that such blessings draw attention away from the truly important focus of our Sunday celebration as Christians – Jesus Christ, praise of God and the Sacraments. That aside, I encourage churches to explore the pastoral and evangelistic possibilities of the blessing of pets.

I'm not sure, however, that such pet blessings really have much to do with St. Francis. I hope they don't distract from the message poor man from Assisi. His message was Jesus Christ: to know God in Jesus Christ, to live like Jesus Christ and share Jesus Christ with the world. I admit that I am just an "aspiring" Franciscan. I have not yet had the courage to truly follow Jesus Christ as Francis did.

The way to God through Jesus Christ as Francis taught is marked by clear Gospel principles. He offers a staggeringly simple way. It is plain that possessions and the need to secure them lead to self-centeredness and greed. The answer was to own nothing. If there is no wealth, there will be no war. He certainly understood that not all are called to radical simplicity and voluntary poverty. All Christians are called to be sure that we gather to ourselves no more than "enough" for life. Access and extravagance have no place in the realm of God. While others go hungry and suffer, we with many possessions and security still have too much. I still have too much.

Francis also reminded us that the way to God includes celibacy and chastity. In his delightful book, Franciscan Spirituality: Following St. Francis Today [(SPCK, 1994), p. 69], Brother Ramon [a member of the Society of St. Francis (an order in the Church of England and the Episcopal Church) who died in 2000]:

"He [Francis] was quite clear about sexual chastity. It meant abstinence for brothers and sisters of the First [men] and Second [women], and the discipline within marriage for the Third Order [those following the Franciscan way while living in the world] brothers and sisters. But this was not a negative retreat into an asexual frigidity when relating to human beings.... In our own day we are aware that sexuality is not limited to genital

expression. We know that all our relationships, all our creativity, inspiration, and appreciation of things good, true, and beautiful are suffused by our sexuality, which lends warmth, tenderness, and enchantment. Francis and his company may have shared the inhibitions of his day, but practically, there was a joyful celebration of human relationships. Celibacy [and chastity], in this context, is not a denial of sexuality, but a way of sharing that is not only an intellectual, but also an emotional and tender dimension.”

Francis insisted that obedience is a necessary part of the Christian life. Brother Ramon (p. 72) writes, “Obedience is the surrender to God’s will directly, through the Spirit’s voice in scripture and community. This is a disciplined witness in a self-oriented society.” Obedience demands both listening and humility. “Obedience” must begin with the admonition in James 1:19: “Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry.” Within a Franciscan order of brothers or sisters, this obedience is to those in authority. For those who are ordained in the Episcopal Church, it includes obedience to the Constitution and Canons (including the Rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer) of the Episcopal Church and to those in authority. For all Christians, it means that we will together seek God in the world and live in a way that embodies our faith, hope and love in Jesus Christ.

Finally and perhaps where the blessing of pets fits with Francis, he did delight in creation as a window into wonder of God. In the first “biography” of the Saint (written in about 1229), Thomas of Celano writes, “How great do you think was the delight the beauty of flowers brought to his soul whenever he saw their lovely form and noticed their sweet fragrance? He would immediately turn his gaze to the beauty of that flower, brilliant in springtime, sprouting from the root of Jesse. Whenever he found an abundance of flowers, he used to preach to them and invite them to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason” [see “The Life of Saint Francis” in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, edited by R.J. Armstrong, J.A.W. Hellmann and W.J. Short (New City Press, 2001), p. 251]. The blessing of pets on St. Francis Day might well be call to delight in creation and a chance to call of God’s creatures to the praise of God in Jesus Christ.

The earliest Franciscan manuscripts ascribe the following prayer to Francis himself and they tell us that it was offered before the Crucifix in San Damiano [see Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, p. 40]:

*Most High,
glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart,
and give me
true faith,
certain hope,
and perfect charity,
sense and knowledge,
Lord,
that I may carry out*

Your holy and true command.

In the end, this is the way of St. Francis: to seek and to do God's will with joy and thanksgiving.

Most high, omnipotent, good Lord, grant your people grace gladly to renounce the vanities of this world; that, following the way of blessed Francis, we may for love of you delight in your whole creation with perfect joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Aloha ma o Iesu Kristo, ko mākou Haku,
+Bob