

The Episcopal Church usually schedules a service like this, A Blessing of the Animals, on or around October 4 which is the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi because of the tradition of his love of nature and creation and "all creatures, great and small," as the English hymn puts it. I think that part of his history is probably why Francis remains such a popular saint even in the minds and hearts of people who pay little attention to the Church's calendar of Saints otherwise.

But Francis' popularity also stems from the fact that many of us believe that he probably lived a life as close to an "imitation of Christ" as anyone who ever lived and tried to follow Jesus. There is the familiar story of Francis and the leper which is reminiscent of Jesus' healing of the **ten** lepers in today's Gospel reading. Apparently, Francis had a life-long fear and abhorrence of lepers, as so many did in the ancient world because the disease was so disfiguring and so little understood.

One day, while on horseback near Assisi, Francis met a man afflicted with this dread disease and the very sight of him filled the young friar with horror and disgust. Convicted of his own prejudice in this matter, he jumped off his horse, threw his arms around the horribly disfigured man and kissed him. The man reached out his hand for alms and Francis gave him what little he had. He mounted his horse to ride off, but when he looked around, he couldn't see the leper anywhere and it dawned on him in a flash that the leper he had kissed was none other than Jesus himself!

This apparently was no isolated event, but was followed up by a visit to a leper colony miles south of Assisi and caring for them became an ongoing ministry for the friars of this first Franciscan community. So many meditations over the centuries have drawn out the spiritual ramifications of this powerful encounter – not only challenging the church to be fully inclusive, but highlighting the fact that we must – in our own lives – so many times "kiss the leper clean."

Sometimes we do that by confronting our own worst fears face to face – like Francis did with the leper -- in a kind of "aversion therapy." It may be by reaching out to those who most disgust or repulse us. Or it may be by embracing the "leper within," our own shadow side which must be accepted and integrated if we are ever to be whole spiritually.

So Francis has so many lessons to teach us in addition to what we are celebrating here today. He is the patron saint of non-violence as we hear in the familiar Prayer attributed to him, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace, where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith..." the prayer begins.

But today we're celebrating the oneness St. Francis was able to experience with nature and the natural world, including the animals who have become our friends and companions along the

way. And that aspect of his life is sung in one of the great hymns he wrote: “All **creatures** of our God and King, lift up your voices, let us sing: Alleluia, alleluia.” All creatures...of our God and King!

And it really was the sense of connection he felt, the sense of oneness even with the whole created order that undergirded his love for the animals and even the plants. He used familial terms like “mother earth,” “brother sun and sister moon,” even “sister death” to lead us toward experiencing that same oneness and acceptance.

Richard Rohr, that latter day Franciscan who has influenced so many of us here at New Song [wrote this in his daily meditation last week: “Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of ecology, animals, non-violence, and peacemaking – because he understood that the entire circle of life has a Great Lover at the center of it all. In Francis’ world, the sun, moon, animals, plants, and elements are all shown reverence and even personal subjectivity as “brother” and “sister.” He refused to exclude anything. He went to the edge, to the bottom; he kissed the leper, he loved the poor, he wore patches on the outside of his habit so everybody would know that’s what he was like inside. He didn’t hide from his shadow. He wasn’t an intellectual; he didn’t begin with universal philosophies and ideas and abstractions. For Francis, there was one world and it was all sacred.]

Richard Rohr even dedicated his latest book to his recently put-down Labrador retriever and wrote that his faithful canine friend had been Christ to him, in many ways. That may be going a bit far for some, but if we are talking about faithfulness, gentleness, and unconditional love there are a lot of us in this room who could say the same about our companion animals.

The theme of today’s Gospel is gratitude – the gratitude Jesus celebrates in the one leper out of ten who returned to give thanks for his healing. The reason we are having this service today, at least for many of us, is the same. Gratitude for the companionship, faithfulness, and even love we have experienced from our four-legged (and other!) friends.

We call it The Blessing of Animals. I prefer to think it is they who have blessed us!