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Holy Comforter

Richmond VA

October 4, 2015; the Feast of St. Francis

Readings: Genesis 1:20-25; Psalm; Galatians 6:14-18; Matthew 6:25-26.

To Identify with St. Francis

On this day, we celebrate the life of St. Francis ---this is a day that comes into our lives on a Sunday, which in so many ways, reflects the life of St. Francis and the fundamental concerns of the Gospel...of what Jesus taught us.

We have our animal companions with us in church today, which says a lot...that we realize our journey as human-beings is linked to, bound to our relationship with all life created by God.

Yes, we love our dogs, our cats, our horses, our birds...all our animal companions, and that the connection we have is of God, for we are called to care for all the animals and for all creation.

Some have told me that they fear we miss the full story of St. Francis by blessing animals on his day...and I can see their point if that was all that we did without commentary, but having the blessing of animals in the midst of our celebration of the Holy Eucharist and in the midst of our other ministries, avoids a narrow interpretation of St. Francis.

On this day, we also have our monthly ingathering for our food pantry. St. Francis' call to be devoted to God, to Jesus, was a call to serve the poor, and a call to identify with the poor by so identifying with the poverty of Jesus.

The fact that we give of ourselves on this day to support the food pantry, helps us to identify with the way both Jesus and St. Francis gave of themselves to help those in need.

Everything that we do, with an awareness of our identity as God's children, friends of God, part of the Body of Christ, enables us to grow in our relationship with God and with God's world.

Bringing a box of cereal to give to our visitors to the Food Pantry, has a spiritual aspect as well as a material benefit to those in need.

We, like St. Francis, are able to identify with Christ by how we act...through our generosity...our generosity that flows from our love for God and our awareness that we are members of the human family created by God...that we are not in this life to accumulate more and more for ourselves as individuals or individual families, but we are called to share...share ourselves, our resources, our compassion.

St. Francis did this in such a way ---through God's grace being so able to identify with Jesus, in all that Jesus gave...that, it is reported, St. Francis developed the stigmata ---the wounds of Christ, bleeding from his hands for no apparent reason.

And not to joke about this...but chances are that will not happen to you if you bring food for the food pantry.

But I am sure that you will receive what God wants you to receive...and it could be something as dramatic as what St. Francis received but more likely perhaps, a sense of peace, wellbeing, and a knowledge that you are God's companion in caring for others, in sharing God's compassion with our hurting world.

This sort of giving to God by giving of ourselves and our resources is made possible through an awareness that all we have comes from God.

Such was the awareness that caused St. Francis to give up a life of privilege to be with and help the poor...to be among the poor as one

of them.

When I was on retreat a couple of weeks ago, one of the readings for a service was that of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet with ointment and wipes his feet with her hair.¹

There is great shock on the part of the righteous when she does this to Jesus...this great act of love and kindness on her part was not only unexpected, it was wrong in the eyes of those with power. But Jesus explains that this woman went out of her way to care for him because she knew all that Jesus/God had done for her...the forgiveness of her sins is what the story says, but as I prayed with this passage, I had the sense that the main point was that she knew...she knew...she knew God's grace...all that God had done for her, and she had to respond.

That Gospel reading relates to our Gospel reading for today from Matthew.

For those who wonder about such things, this is one of the newly suggested readings for this day that was approved at General Convention this past summer.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them."²

This passage also emphasizes God's care for us, that God will provide for us...just as God provides for the birds.

If we need to be reminded, this passage reminds us that God, our Creator, also created the birds and all the animals, and cares for them, and by extrapolation ... God intends that they share this earth with us, that we share it with them.

¹ Luke 7:36-50

² Matthew 6:25-26

We are God's stewards of creation.

The way humans have related to the creation...to all living creatures and to the earth has changed...in some ways we are out of sync with the creation but in other ways we are more aware and we are seeking to care for animals and creation in ways that matter and make a difference.

We as a church strive to be more aware and care for animals and all of creation...not every church has an Eco committee...this is somewhat part of our DNA as the Church of the Holy Comforter.

St. Francis is known for his connection with animals...the animals were said to come him.

All of this makes me think of another Francis...Pope Francis.

I was on retreat as the Pope was starting his visit in the US, so I've not yet caught up on all that the Pope said and did.

From what I do know, I think the Pope who knew himself and God's call to him when chose the name of Francis, as he did when he became Pope.

The Pope helps people to see the connections...that caring for creation is also care for the poorest in the world...that our souls and our actions and attitudes about refugees are connected.

The Pope's visit to the US was truly amazing.

His address to congress was both intellectually rich and insightful in many ways, while also bringing congress and us back to the Golden Rule...so simple and yet seemingly so hard to do in this world on the national and international level...

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Mt 7:12).

"This Rule points us in a clear direction. Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves. In a word, if

we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life; if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities. The yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time will use for us.”³

I was able to see some of the Pope’s Interfaith service, held at Ground Zero, which more than what anyone said, spoke loudly of the Pope’s and many others desire for peace and understanding in the world, starting with world’s religions.

Did the animals come to St. Francis because they could sense his love, his compassion for all, his connection to Christ, his peace that he desired to share with all?

Did his connection with animals and all of creation aid him in hearing God’s call to him?

Everything is connected; everything we do has a spiritual aspect and spiritual consequences.

Such is the message of the life of St. Francis, and such was the message Pope Francis brought to the US Congress and the people of our country.

Today we embark on our five week Annual Giving Campaign...which also helps us live into our focus on St. Francis this day.

The theme of this year’s Annual Giving Campaign is “God the Giver.”

St. Francis received the grace of knowing all that God had done for him, and he acted...his life changed...and so we remember him and celebrate him today.

When we know that God is the Giver of the creation in which we live, the animals we love, the life we live, everything we have, that God is the giver of on-going care and love for us, and that when we breath

³ <http://time.com/4048176/pope-francis-us-visit-congress-transcript/>

our last breath on this earth, God will give us eternal life...when we know this, giving to support God's mission in the world through our church becomes a great joy.

The author of your bulletin insert, the Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows, invites us to take this day and our focus on St. Francis into prayer...to embrace St. Francis by asking questions about our relationship to "stuff" and what might be getting in the way of serving others more generously.

I recommend the insert to you...see what gets your attention as you read it. I would add that it might also be a good exercise to consider, perhaps journal about... what does, what is, helping you to be generous?

What does help you care for creation?

There maybe a grace that God has given you or is giving you, that you and God can talk about together.

From the Jesuit retreats I've taken over the years and my understanding of Ignatian spirituality, which is the spiritual path that nurtured Pope Francis in his Christian walk, I am confident that God desires that you know more fully and more deeply the grace that God has given you, and wants to give you.

Let us pray: Thank you, God, for St. Francis and all that his life teaches us. Help us each know your love and care for us; help us to know who you call us to be in this world for You, for others, for all creation. Help us to know what you call us to do and offer of ourselves as stewards of your Church and your world, so that we may glorify You, now and always. *Amen.*