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Finding our Place in Creation

My preaching head is in two places this morning. We have the set readings before us to reflect on, and as is our custom in early October, later in the day we honor the beloved saint, Francis, with the blessings of animals. Over the last two weeks of preaching I have talked about the challenges of addiction and recovery and tried to help us navigate another polarizing moment in our culture. It's a lot to both take in and deliver. Maybe that is the reason I'm steering clear of Genesis this morning with its theme on marriage and the gospel's rejection of divorce and adultery. Another day.

I thought a shift of tone would do this preacher some good. So, bring on the animals and Francis!

Last week Sally and I went to Heronfield Academy, a middle school in Hampton Falls, for their first blessing of the animals. Sally and I lead their chapel service there from time to time. We had a great turn out with the children bringing in over 30 dogs, one very out a place cat, a hamster, a rat and one worm that a boy had just dug up a worm out the ground to make his friends laugh – which they did.

What is so good about looking to St. Francis in times of heaviness and seeming chaos is that his writings and theology try to put things and people into their rightful place. He placed animals, like the creation story in Genesis, at the very beginning. Our relationship to them can tell us something about ourselves. I led a prayer for the students:

God the Creator of all: that all your creatures may thank you and serve you.

That it may please you to open our eyes to the joy and beauty of your creation, and to see your presence in all your works.

When asked: what is your favorite season, many of us living in New England would probably vote for the Fall. The air is crisp. Going for a walk or a drive is like a front row seat to an art show. This is the season where tourists from all of the country and the world in fact, visit us to see changing color of the leaves. Simply put: the changing color displays is an annual gift that reminds us of the wonder of God's creation.

I continued with my prayer: That it may please you to make us faithful stewards of your creation, caring for the earth, air, seas, and all the creatures who live in them.

That it may please you to make us aware of our responsibility to all your creatures and to be faithful in caring for them,

The church has minimized the word stewardship to seem to apply only to the ways in which we give our money and time to the support its mission. That support is appreciated to be sure, but it is much more than that. To be steward is much greater of a call. We have much to care for that God created. To care for our relationships. To care about the environment and injustice and the toll that war, greed, indifference, poverty and violence take on God's good creation. How are we doing? Chances are, with God's help, we can always do better and more.

God inspired St. Francis to call all of the animals his brothers and sisters. He was the medieval Doctor Doolittle. Then turning to each pet, one by one, I offer this prayer of blessing: Fellow creature, friend and companion: May God your creator and preserver bless, defend, heal, and keep you, this day and always. Amen.

What I enjoy about celebrating Francis is that it feels like All Saints' Day for animals. We can give simply thanks for the animals we have known and loved. A reminder about what can bring us joy. It is a prompt to think about how we all fit into God's plan for what God has made.

What I'm trying to work through this morning is this: on the days we seek order and peace in a tumultuous and conflicted world, how do we go about doing that? Where do we start? When we start at the beginning of our story how do we not get discouraged or lost along the way? Or simply caught up in the fast pace of the lives we lead?

So much of what we read in the New Testament is meant to encourage. When have we not needed encouragement? If ever I feel overwhelmed and spend far too much time worrying about things beyond my control, I find my way to these words from St. Paul to the Philippians 4:4-6 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

It may be true as today's collect suggested that God is more ready to hear than we to pray, nevertheless, keep praying. Keep the conversation going. Listen. Stay connected to God and the community that gathers to tell stories about God. That's us.

The other part of my preaching head wants to prepare the ground for many weeks ahead reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, which if I guessed right, is not our most known or beloved book of the Bible. One way to think about what is letter is trying to do has to do with what we might call today: code switching.

Code switching is a term that relates to how speakers of two or more languages use different words from various languages a single conversation. Puerto Rico, because of its history as a colony of Spain, and as a colony or territory of the U.S. is famous for its residents falling into the form of Spanglish – mixing Spanish and English words. There is also Hinglish – a mix of Hindi and English – and many more.

Another form of code switching can happen when we slip into a particular accent or slang to fit in. I know that when I lived in the North Florida – which still has the feel of the South – I would catch myself if I ever feel into using Ya'll instead of the "you guys" I was accustomed to growing up in Ohio. I spend one week in England and I find that I'm using the word "brilliant" to describe anything and every good.

We code switch for many reasons: we want to fit in or even impress or ingratiate ourselves to the other.

In the reflection material at the front of your bulletins, we are reminded that the audience of the letter was a group of largely Jewish Christians – as opposed to the large number of Gentiles (non-Jews) that were receiving the Good News in large numbers as Paul and other apostles traveled far

and wide. The writer of Hebrews wanted to these believers to understand fully who Christ was and his purpose for coming into the world so that they would not get discouraged and give up on their new found faith. The letter uses images that are familiar to them to explain why he lived and died.

We get to eavesdrop in a way that newly minted Christians were trying understand who Christ really was. For Jewish Christians especially, they took great comfort in knowing that Christ shared their spiritual roots. He was appointed heir, thus connected to their family story. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being. Today we might code-switch ourselves and say: Christ and God share the same divine DNA.

Hebrews 2: Jesus, for a little while was made lower than the angels. By the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

This reading touches on the heart of our faith. We do not live or love, suffer or rejoice, on our own. Fellow pilgrims along the way have gone before us and have shared similar doubts, desires, hopes and fears.

St. Francis called animals his brothers and sisters. Jesus calls us, his children, his brothers and sisters.

Let me close with a prayer I never tire of praying. A prayer attributed to St. Francis. It's power lays in its truth and its invitation to make us part of God's purpose and plan to heal the world from hatred, injury, despair and sadness. No spectators allowed.

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;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

