

Feast of St Francis

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Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio

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I want to extend a welcome to our guests today – of course, to any new humans who are joining us, but also those non-humans who, through no fault of your own, found yourself at church today. I want to give a special shout out to my pets, livestreaming from home – Monty, Yolandi and Cash. Thanks for tuning in. You have St. Francis to thank for this. He would have gotten a kick out of it I think – the fool of God who was known to preach to the birds.

His feast day was Friday but we moved it to today so we could invite our pets to church and reflect on the life of a man who called himself “Brother Ass.” Francis remains such a striking model of a follower of Christ that people still shape their lives around his rule. Our own Rick Pearce, who often preaches on St Francis Day and other Sundays, is a member of the Third-Order Franciscans, people who remain in family and secular life while shaping that life around Franciscan values.

Most of us know St. Francis as that animal lover and prayerful protector of creation and channel of peace. We want him to grace our gardens and bless our pets. But really, Francis was a very extreme figure in his day – laying down his inherited wealth and privilege and living a life of poverty, care for the poor, and peace that flew in the face of 13th century values which valued none of those things. In that regard, his time was not unlike our time. Francis set aside all the things that got in the way of following Christ, and he did it in a way that could not be ignored by his family, friends, his community or the church. And because he was also charismatic and convincing and charming he got a lot of people to join him.

Francis’s was born in 1181 in Assisi Italy, and his given name was *Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone*. His father was a cloth merchant who nicknamed him Francesco after returning from a trip to France. He grew up wealthy, fashionable, and popular, with a lovely singing voice. At the same time, he was sickly, dreamy and prone to visions. He wanted to be a knight and a prince. And he also found himself drawn to the poor, of whom there were many, in an era marked by war, famine and plague. And he also had a tendency to hear the voice of Christ. Of all the things that spoke to him – wealth, glory, valor, followers, the voice of Christ spoke the loudest. And in the end, it won out.

Christ said things to him like: Why are you abandoning the master for the servant and the prince for the vassal? In the ruins of San Damiano, Christ said “Francis, repair my house.” On another occasion, Jesus told him “Replace what you love vainly with spiritual goods.”

And Francis took the voice of Christ literally. Long before he realized he was called to help rebuild Christ’s church in a larger sense, Francis carried a lot of stones to the Church of San Damiano to rebuild its walls.

Over time he founded a monastic order with friars dedicated to the life of voluntary poverty, and to the mutuality and care for the poor that this life required. And while it was a humble life, it was also a very visible one, because Francis was full of public surprises; and as a result, his memory was marked by

legends. So since we have so many four legged creatures among us, I thought I'd share one of the most famous legends that surrounded Francis – the taming of the Wolf of Gubbio (pronounced Gubbjo).¹

It happened that the town of Gubbio in Umbria was beset by a large and hungry wolf. It had come down from the forests surrounding the city, and began to attack the resident's livestock, until it developed a taste for the residents themselves. People were afraid to leave the city's walls, as the wolf lay in wait just outside its gates.

But luckily for the people of Gubbio, Francis was living there at the time. And he decided to take matters into his own hands. "I am going to go meet with the wolf," he announced. The people of the city tried to talk him out of it, but he was Francis, which means that he was determined. So he headed out the city gates taking a small group of his followers with him.

When the wolf saw Francis he charged right at him, teeth bared, tongue lolling, eyes blazing. But Francis made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to stop attacking the people in the name of God. The wolf trotted up to Francis and put his head in Francis' hands.

Francis had a talk with the wolf, telling it that it had done evil in the land, destroying and killing God's creature without divine permission, and even devouring people, who were made in the image of God. As a result, Francis said, "the people are against you, the dogs pursue you and the people of the city are your enemies."

"But I will make peace between you and the city." Francis said. "If you will stop attacking them, they will forgive you and no longer pursue you. And I will arrange that they feed you every day. For it is hunger that drew you to harm them. As long as you live among them you will not be hungry. But this will be so only if you promise never to harm a person or animal again. Do you agree?"

The wolf made its oath by placing its forepaws in Francis' outstretched hands. He returned with Francis peacefully to the city where the people were amazed at the transformation. They agreed to feed the wolf every day, and the beast lived among them as a friend for two years until he died of old age.

The people of Gubbio mourned the death of the wolf, gave it an honorable burial and later built the Church of St Francis of the Peace on the spot.

It was considered a legend for centuries. Then in 1872 during renovations of the church the skeleton of a large wolf that was many hundreds of years old was exhumed. So perhaps it was not just a story after all.

I tell this story because many of our visitors today live in families where the people feed them every day and care for them and communicate with them and understand them and love them. Our pets teach us that we have placed within us the ability to make room in our lives for beings so very different from ourselves, and to be stewards of their care.

What was the miracle that Francis worked in Gubbio? That the wolf was fundamentally changed or that the people were?

¹ Summary drawn from Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolf_of_Gubbio accessed 10.4.24

While the story is called the Taming of the Wolf of Gubbio, I believe that Francis also tamed the people of Gubbio. He tamed them of their fear of the thing that was killing them and its power over them. He tamed them of their indifference to the hunger of the animal at their gate and reminded them of their ability to meet its needs. He tamed them of their own otherness and the stories that everyone knows about how dangerous wolves are and how friendly people are.

Francis tamed them of all these things by modeling the courage necessary to broker the agreement, to change the situation and to heal the breach. I think that one of the greatest gifts that flowed out of Francis' voluntary poverty was his ability to see all of creation as equal and beloved in the eyes of God. To do this, he had to lay down everything that stood between him and the love of God, and between him and the love of God's creation. So he laid down his wealth and his privilege. He laid down his status with his family and his community. He laid down his reputation. He laid down his dreams and aspirations. He even laid down his weaknesses, his ill health and his chronic fatigue. And he let God raise him into the man that God needed him to be both then and now.

That's what it meant for Francis to follow in the footsteps of Christ and to embrace his cross and his suffering. It meant death and it meant resurrection. And it meant taking his place in the created world as a beloved creature among beloved creatures. A beloved creature with the ability to love back.

Perhaps that's why everything and everyone was a beloved sibling to Brother Francis. His fellow monastics were brothers and sisters. He spoke of Lady Poverty and Sister Death. Brother Sun and Sister Moon and Mother Earth.

Francis' example changed others as well. The people of Gubbio discovered that they could forgive an enemy, feed it, befriend it and mourn it when it died.

Before turning the wolf over to the people of Gubbio, Francis preached a short homily to them: He is quoted as saying: "How much we ought to dread the jaws of hell, if the jaws of so small an animal as a wolf can make a whole city tremble through fear?"

It was no small thing to befriend this wolf. But it was also not an impossible thing. Francis teaches us that the way of peace is no small thing, but it is possible, and it requires our own courageous and outrageous faith in its possibility as much as it requires the repentance and reconciliation that brings it about. It requires of us the humility to be creatures among creatures, all beloved of God. And that humility allows us to receive the help that God sends to remake us the divine image.

Francis recognized this help as the virtues that he addressed as his own sisters. So I'll leave you with this prayer to those divine sisters that shaped him and can shape us as well.

Hail Queen Wisdom,
The Lord Keep thee and thy holy sister, pure Simplicity.
Hail Lady Holy Poverty,
The Lord keep thee and thy holy sister, Humility.
Hail Lady holy Charity.
The Lord keep thee and thy holy sister Obedience.
Hail all ye most holy virtues
The Lord keep you,
For it is from God alone you derive.

Amen.