

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Francis. A day to bring your Animals in to be blessed – but really a day to recognize a man who gave his life to having a relationship with God’s creation, to literally doing what Jesus commanded – to care for the poor, the sick, the lowly.

And people thought he was crazy, I mean really cuckoo, probably because he stripped in the town square and renounced his inheritance to go take care of people and trust that God will provide for him as God does for the birds, the fish, the plants.

Francis had a way of helping the rich to open up their hearts and consciences to give to the poor and not condemn them. He was different.

He had a way of talking to people, teaching them, showing them how to live. He never toned down the Gospel, he simply **embodied** it.

Francis is a great example of a follower of Christ. But not all of us can be like St. Francis, and please don’t go streaking down Greenwood Ave...

But I think there is something we can relate to in his story. That God's presence in our lives changes us.

My family’s life changed when we got a dog. And it was a process.

When my little sister, Tasha, was in second grade she really wanted a puppy. She would bring home a new book every day from the library and read it with my mother, hoping to convince her to get a dog. She would write to Santa, leave her books in obvious places with the pages open to the dog she wanted, and even leave hints on the computer screen saver. Eventually my parents gave in, and we ended up with a little Westie.

Now my older sister Alexandra made Tasha promise that it would be her dog, that she would take care of him, take him out even when it was cold outside. She even had her sign a handwritten contract binding her to this promise!

Even though we all took care of our dog, and loved him – Tasha would periodically be reminded of that contract, reminded that she was responsible. Typically when it was raining or snowing...

And I think that in this story we are all a tiny bit like my little sister, and less like St. Francis.... We as human beings who love the idea of having dominion over creation, and being stewards of God's earth, but when its cold out we don’t really want to take care of it.

But by being followers of Christ haven't we all kinda signed onto this Christianity thing and all that comes with it? And I mean ALL.

St. Francis is a reminder to us, of what we signed onto. Like the older sister holding up the contract, reminding us that we are to care for God's animals, and people...

In the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians, towards the end he writes this: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

That's such a weird sentence to write. Why the Cross?

I mean a cross was a cursed thing, a symbol of shame, the Roman instrument of humiliating death. But Paul makes it clear that this boast isn't just in any cross, but the cross of Jesus Christ. And to make a boast in the cross of Jesus means that he boasts in everything that is involved in the cross of Jesus.

It means embracing that we are sinners, it means embracing that God is our hope in the world, it means embracing all of God's creation and caring for it. It means embracing that we actually need God.

To make the cross of Jesus our "boast" in life, and when we do that, we see that our relationship with our possessions, our superficial relationships with people, our money – all of that changes as a result. In this relationship we now see ourselves as dead to this world and the world dead to us. When we are gripped by this truth to live a crucified life in the midst of this world, everything changes.

So I ask a simple question to all of us here today: Have you experienced a personal, internal transformation in your relationship with Christ?

You see, for Paul to be crucified to the world means that he has been crucified to the world of normalcy. To the world that has dominant systems, that has systematic racism, that has sexism, and abuse, that has society which is ruled by power, wealth, and a justice system that only benefits the few.

How does our personal relationship with Christ affect our relationship with the world as we define it? Have we been crucified to it and it to us?

Too often, it seems, that we mirror those of the world...that we too just finger-point at what is wrong, and judge those who we think have messed up. Paul was battling this

thousands of years ago, and we too are still working through this ... yet there is hope, and it comes in the form of four words in the Gospel reading from Mark: *That we bear one another's burdens.*

It's crazy isn't it? To imagine that we can devote ourselves to other beings, to actually carry their burdens, to care for and live with them.

To imagine that God, through Jesus's body, bears our burdens? How do we function in a way so as to not give up on the world -not give ourselves to the world but to Christ?

Maybe St. Francis shows us.

Maybe he is just one human who tried not to be crucified to the world but instead to be crucified in the cross.

He invites us into a life that is full of adventure, interconnectedness with nature, and an embrace of all that Life in Jesus Christ has to offer. Freedom.

The Freedom to not adhere to the status quo. The freedom to live with nature and be one with the lowly, the freedom to be different and to love.

It's crazy to think that a man, a simple man who literally gave sermons to birds, and gave to every person who asked of him - that Francis would go on to lead his own Order of Christians to live a similar lifestyle to his and become one of the most venerated figures in history.

Through relationship Francis changed lives. And it definitely was not easy.

And it couldn't have been easy for my sister Tasha every time she looked outside and knew she'd get stuck taking the dog out. It couldn't have been easy that for thirteen years. My older sister would whip that piece of paper out and nudge and remind my little sister of that promise she made, that contract she signed, that piece of paper saying she would care for the dog. That she would bear the burden of being in constant relationship with our pet. That caring for someone means not just on the sunny days, but the rainy, cold, snowy days too.

Sometimes these nudges are all we need to live as Christians crucified to the cross.

And so I leave you with one last nudge from St. Francis of Assisi:

May God bless us with **discomfort** at easy answers,
Half truths and superficial relationships,
So that we will live deeply in our hearts.

May God bless us with **anger**
At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people
And the earth, so that we will work
For justice, equity and peace.
May God bless us with tears to shed
For those who suffer,
So that we will reach out our hands
To comfort them
And change their pain to joy
And may God bless us with the **foolishness** to think that we can make a
difference in our world,
So that we will do the things which others say cannot be done.

Amen.