

St. Francis Day 2011 *“God’s new Creation”*

Three years ago I attended a national conference in Seattle in which Steven Charleston, then the Dean of Episcopal Divinity School presented the Genesis Covenant. It is a statement about the relationship of the church to humanity’s destruction of creation and a call to reverse that with a new understanding of humanity’s place in the created order and our responsibility to care for the gift of creation. It was a timely call and challenge to the churches to become “green” – not only a means of independence from oil, but as a strong theological statement about our relationship to God and the reconciliation and restoration of all things to the wholeness which was/is intended by God.

That intention is expressed in the Ten Commandments which Moses brought down the mountain as the word of God for the people. The wholeness that God knows can and should be our life in creation is expressed in God’s law for the observance of a Sabbath day – a day of rest for humans, animals, the earth.

The observance of St. Francis Day in the churches has grown over the past 20 years as we have enjoyed the opportunity to honor the importance of animals in our lives, and thereby affirm the importance of creation to our relationship with God. It is fitting that we gather here on our Sabbath day to honor them.

St. Francis is one of the most well known of our saints – statues of him adorn gardens across the land and, no doubt, in Europe as well. He is also one of the least emulated.

Francis listened to the teachings of Jesus on Sundays and eventually that led him to give up all his inheritance and privilege as a young man and hit the road. He realized that he was burdened by the material and privileged nature of his life, that, by “yoking” himself to Jesus, he would be freed to enjoy the life that God was creating within and around him.

Unburdened, he rebuilt churches and then traveled to share the unconditional love of Christ with all he encountered. It was his unity with people and the land that enabled him to have a special relationship with animals. He knew that it is not we who “bless” animals but it is animals who bless us.

Animals have a special place in the stories of scriptures. They are created before we are. In their DNA they understand their connectedness with the creation in ways that we have separated ourselves from. I heard a number of years ago that, if creation took place in a 24 hour day, then humans would appear during the last 5 seconds! Animals play a prominent role in the story of Noah, as being important to preserve. Donkeys appear in the Hebrew scriptures as well as the Gospel narratives. Sheep are an important metaphor in both. Our animal friends have much to teach us.

Among other things they remind us to slow down, to attend, to love unconditionally, to play, to get outside of ourselves and to simply get outside! Be in creation, be enfolded by it, humbled by it, and recognize our interrelatedness and dependence upon it. Observe and keep Holy the Sabbath.

The Celts knew this well and that is why Celtic Christianity reflects a basic understanding of Christ that is centered in creation. John Scotus Eriugena, a 9th Century, celtic teacher, taught that Christ comes to reawaken our true nature.¹ He comes to show us the face of God and also the face of the human soul. Nature and grace flow from the essence of God. The gift of nature is the gift of “being” and the gift of grace is the gift of “well-being”. Grace is given to “restore us to the core of our being and to free us from the unnaturalness of what we are doing to one another and to the earth.”

Few of us will walk away from here today and throw off our inheritance and take to the streets to teach about the love of Christ as Francis did. But we could. Imagine! We can discover a freedom beyond our wildest dreams – a freedom to be the humans we are meant to be. A freedom from compulsion to achieve, perform, compete. A freedom to love without bounds. A freedom that we see in the animals that surround us in our homes and on this island.

Perhaps we will begin, as a community, to address our relationship to the planet. How are we conserving our own resources? Are we recycling as much as we can? What else can we do to be more “green” – more friendly to the planet and the animals that surround us?

A Poem from St. Francis:²

*I once spoke to my friend, an old squirrel, about the Sacraments ---
he got so excited*

*and ran into a hollow in his tree and came
back holding some acorns, an owl feather,
and a ribbon head had found.*

*And I just smiled and said, “Yes, dear,
you understand:*

*everything imparts
His grace.”*

God is making a new creation – the work of grace and nature continues to transform us, if we will allow it. Imagine! You can be a part of it!

Amen.

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¹ Newell, J. Philip, “Christ of the Celts”, p. 9

² Ladinsky, Daniel, “Love Poems from God”, p. 53.