

## **Sermon, Proper 22B, October 3, 2021, Jane A. Beebe**

“I will wash my hands in innocence, O Lord,  
that I may go in procession round your altar,

Singing aloud a song of thanksgiving  
and recounting all your wonderful deeds.” (Psalm 26:6-7)

Tomorrow, October 4, is the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi. We will have our blessing of the animals next Sunday, outside after coffee hour. However, there seems to be resonance between St. Francis’ life and ministry, and what Jesus wants us to know about children. There are many stories and legends about Francis. Whether they are strictly historically accurate does not concern me. They point us to some lovely qualities of Francis as a saint that storytellers want us to know and remember. They certainly highlight his close relationship with his Savior.

### **Saint Francis and the Sermon for the Birds**

As retold by Brian “Fox” Ellis

*“My sweet little [brothers and] sisters, oh, birds of the sky, you are bound unto heaven, to God, your Creator. In every beat of your wing and every note of your song praise Him. He has given you the greatest of gifts, the liberty of the air. You neither sow, nor reap, yet God provides for you the most delicious morsels, streams and lakes to quench your thirst, hill and dale for your home, tall trees to build your nests, and the most beautiful clothing, a change of feathers with every*

*season. You and your kind were preserved in the Ark of Noah. Clearly, Creator loves you most dearly, His gifts flow forth in abundance; so please be careful of the sin of thanklessness, and always sing out your praises for the Lord, our God!”*

*It is said that after preaching to the birds, Francis touched them with his tunic – the birds were not afraid – and gave them a blessing.”*

Doesn't Francis receive the Kingdom like a little child? In his celebration and blessing of the birds, his willingness to speak to the birds directly—and their willingness to listen!—Francis demonstrates how to take joyful part in Creation. He shows his wonder. The birds have been given special gifts to praise God. Praise is a lovely form of prayer to God. We share in that ourselves when we sing hymns and join in the other parts of the liturgy. When I was doing my field ed placement at Trinity, Ware several years ago I gave a children's sermon about St. Francis. At the end I player a recording of a thrush singing: my first foray into using technology in church! I will never forget the expression on one little girl's face as she listened in wonder, and her excited little intakes of breath.

I believe it is this open wonder that God seeks from us in our prayers of praise. Sometimes it is hard to find this place of trust. Whether our lives are long or short, we have all probably suffered periods—maybe even long periods—of grief, or lack, or confusion, or simply dullness. Yet even a moment of wonder can refresh

our spirits. Our psalmist today encourages us to enter into worship having “washed our hands in innocence.” (Psalm 26:6) There is a lovely film about St. Francis called *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. In it, Pope Innocent addresses Francis with these words: “In our obsession with original sin, we have forgotten original innocence.” The word innocent literally means “not to harm.” An innocent person is free of guile or artifice: childlike.

‘People were bringing little children to [Jesus] in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.’ (Mark 10:13-16)

In the Beatitudes Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3) What if to be “poor in spirit” really means to be innocent, able to receive the kingdom as a child? I suspect that Francis’ vow of poverty was to preserve complete dependence on God for all things. Perhaps the spiritual equivalent is to approach God with empty hands and open hearts, trusting that God will fill them with his presence. Children are naturally in this condition because they are in need of our care. In our relationship with God we need not fear our poverty, whether it is material or spiritual. If we are honest about our condition God will more than meet us halfway, leading us ever closer to the kingdom.

It is clear that Jesus has a special affinity for, and understanding of what it is to be a child. He sees them, accepts them as full human beings, worthy of his notice. This leads me to imagine what circumstances led Jesus to develop such a special care for children. Once Jesus becomes an adult we do not hear any more about Joseph's role in his life. Was Jesus aware that he was adopted—and thus chosen and especially loved? We know Jesus addresses God as Abba: father. Was his complete trust in and love for God nurtured in his own childhood? There is a Benedictine monastery I know of that has a life-size sculpture of Joseph holding the child Jesus in his arms. Beautiful paintings and icons of Mary holding the baby Jesus are everywhere, so I was particularly struck by this tribute to Joseph as nurturing parent.

Recently I was driving on Rt. 9 in mid-afternoon and ended up behind a school bus somewhere near Belchertown. At one stop I saw three kids get off the bus and begin trudging up a hill. An older man (I assume their grandfather) came down the hill to greet them. I was stopped behind the bus just long enough to see the man had been waiting in a bright red lawn chair on the steep drive. He had taken care to be visible and waiting before the bus arrived. One of the younger children ran up to him, still carrying what looked like an enormous backpack relative to the size of the child. The child, backpack and all, was lifted up into a big hug. At the end of the day, isn't this how we want and need to be received by God?

Jesus lifts the children into his arms and blesses them. Can we, like the kids at the bus stop, run towards God, knowing we will be lifted up?