

“St. Francis’ secret”

- Today is one of my most favorite events- the celebration of St. Francis
 - And of course the blessing of the animals
 - We are even going all out this year, with a 1-3pm pet-extravaganza!
 - St. Francis is one of those saints that gets a lot of lip service, but truly is one of the saints whose example we should be trying to follow
 - He was known for his work with the poor, reckless abandonment of possessions
 - And his love of all creation, animals in particular
 - It is no surprise that this saint is the one who convinces proper, church going people everywhere to allow dogs into the church!
 - I wondered a little this year:
 - What was it that allowed Francis to lead a life that made such a huge impact on everyone around him, and even for us today
 - What was his secret?
 - Let’s start looking in the obvious places- the stories that we have about St. Francis in our church history books
 - There are two stories, really, that come down through the centuries to us
 - And I know, you’ve heard them before, but like your favorite stories that your favorite grandfather or uncle tells when the family is all together,
 - It’s always good to hear them again, especially about this saint who has a lot to offer us today
- First is the Wolf of Gubbio ¹
 - The story goes that a fierce wolf began attacking livestock in Gubbio while Francis was living there
 - It was not long before the wolf escalated the attack to the people in the town, and even dining on them exclusively
 - Weapons were rumored to be useless, and all who attempted to kill the wolf were killed
 - Francis was said to have made the sign of the cross as he left the town’s gates and headed towards the wolf’s lair

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolf_of_Gubbio

- As he approached the wolf came running toward him, jaws open
- But Francis once again made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to stop his attacks in the name of God
- The wolf was said to walk docilely up to Francis and lay at his feet.
- Rather than killing the wolf, Francis decided to make peace, and promised to feed the wolf every day so long as it did not attack and kill again
- They even shook on the deal- paw in hand
- And impressive deed, certainly, considering my dogs won't even walk on a leash very well for me
- The second story that brings us here with our pets today is of Francis preaching to the birds ²
 - As he and his companions were walking, Francis told his friends to wait while he goes and preaches to his sisters the birds
 - The birds were intrigued by his voice and none of the flew away
 - He concluded his sermon to them by saying,
 - Beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praise to God.”³
 - It is often that statues of Francis have a bird in his hand or on his shoulder
 - They were our brothers and sisters too, and he advocated serving them wherever they require it
- St. Francis' love for God's creation did not end with the animals
 - For he loved people just as much, and especially the poor
 - He embraced the poorest of the poor- the sick, even the ones with sores on their bodies
 - Francis would help bath them, feed them, and even kiss them in their illness
 - He seemed to have no regard to getting sick himself
 - He was born into a wealthy family, but gave so much away it angered his father
 - So he returned everything his father had given him, and left.
 - He embraced poverty and dedicated himself to serving those who needed it the most.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_of_assisi

³ <http://angels.about.com/od/MiraclesReligiousTexts/p/Francis-Of-Assisi-Miracle-Man-And-Patron-Saint-Of-Animals.htm>

- Francis let nothing stop him from serving God and God's children
- It was no surprise that people were attracted to Francis
 - So what was his secret? It's not really even a secret- so simple and so difficult all at the same time
 - Here's what I think, and what gets me:
 - The secret to his life and popularity was just this: joy and gratitude, with abandonment and freedom⁴ in his life following Jesus' example
 - There was a sense of reckless pursuit of what Francis' believed God was calling him to do.
 - And maybe everyone was also a little curious about the man who talked to animals as well
 - Francis' disregard for material possessions and his care for the sick and poor was so great it was even considered subversive
 - Most people around him thought he had gone too far, and maybe even gone a little crazy
 - But his passion eventually inspired other young men to join him
 - They gave up their possessions, wore simple tunics, worked with their hands to earn food
 - Even slept in caves or crude huts
 - Eventually these groups formed the Franciscan Order, which still serves the poor throughout the world today
- Francis, it is rumored, while on his deathbed, thanked his donkey for carrying him through his life.
 - He died having given everything he had away to help other people
 - While the pets are fun to have in church, and while I love to tell those old apocryphal stories about Francis
 - What I truly hope to become better at, and what I hope is our take away today, is not all of the miraculous things that Francis did
 - But the secret to his life that he had that allowed him to live in such amazing ways, that brought him a peace that was not of this world
 - I want just a little bit of his gratitude and joy that came from a whole-hearted pursuit of Jesus Christ
 - It was from his faith that he gave everything he had, that he loved those society had cast out, the sick and the poor
 - It was out of his inner peace that he could talk with animals and not care what anyone thought

⁴ http://www.satucket.com/lectionary/Francis_Assisi.htm

- He was not perfect- he was maybe a little strange- and to me that just makes him all the more relatable
- For who here is perfect, and not a little strange sometimes?
- We do not have to go live in a cave, or start a commune, to live out God's love in our lives with reckless abandonment
- Today, I hope we can follow his example just a little bit and find that peace that is only found when we are doing what God calls us to do.
 - And doing it with joy and abandonment
- That's the secret to a good life Francis gives us.

Amen.