

I think it's safe to say that we all have some kind of visceral memory around experiences with creation; those memories which fill us up, slow our heart rates, and bring an overwhelming sense of peace because they evoke a *feeling*, a feeling of being out in nature, our in God's world and being entirely at rest in our surroundings. For me, so many of these kinds of memories are tangled up in growing up in Michigan. When I think of creation, I think of the shores of Lake Huron, the sand beneath my toes at the base of 40 Mile Point lighthouse, and the breath-catching fridity of Great Lakes water. I think of the ethereal quiet of Mackinac Island where the only thing you can hear at night are the waves and the intermittent clip clop of horses' hooves. I think of the tree tucked into the back corner of our yard by our dog house that had the perfect V in which to nestle with a book and a radio and enjoy the quiet. I think of the creak of the tree swing by my grandparents' pond with my grandpa standing on the edge with his Cool Whip container of fish food. I think of the dust kicking up on softball fields of my youth and the very distinct smell of that dirt mingled with fall air. And of course, I think about Scully, because how can you not?

Scully is a full blown force of nature all wrapped up in a tiny little 35 pound package. She appreciates *every single smell* of nature, ensuring that no walk with her is brisk and efficient. She understands the maddening

movements of the squirrels, rabbits, deer, and peacocks of our neighborhood, all of which like to chill in the yard and drive her nuts. She loves nothing more than sprawling out on the grass basking in the warmth of the first real sunny day of the year. She understands the power of the snuggle and the joy of peanut butter and that there is no such thing as conditional love. There is no better glimpse of the kingdom of God, the love of God than in the eyes of a puppy who thinks the world revolves around her, and most of the time is exactly right about that.

This is the kind of deep love and appreciation that we commemorate today. Technically, St. Francis' feast day was Friday, but we shifted things a bit and gave Geoffrey the distinct joy of picking a song about Earth's wit and wisdom. The fun thing about celebrating St. Francis is that his life is rife with stories that are nothing short of entertaining and amusing. These are not stories of stark martyrdom and deep theological angst and conversion, but stories of a man who loved nothing more than being our in God's world, playing with, and preaching to all of God's creatures.

I figured there was no better time than this morning to share a couple of my favorite stories from St. Francis' life. The first of which is his affinity for preaching to the birds. Yes, birds. There is one such story where he and several companions were making a trip through the Spoleto Valley when

they came upon a gaggle of all manner of birds. Francis decided there was no better time to leave his companions on the road and go spend some time amongst the feathers. He expected them to flee at his approach but they didn't, and so he figured there's nothing like a captive audience to encourage a sermon, and this is what he said to them:

“My brother and sister birds, you should praise your Creator and always love [God]: [God] gave you feathers for clothes, wings to fly and all other things that you need. It is God who made you noble among all creatures, making your home in thin, pure air. Without sowing or reaping, you receive God's guidance and protection.”

From that point on, Francis always made it a point of preaching to the birds and they apparently listened. Once they were apparently being a smidge too loud during one of his sermons and he shushed them and they listened!

The most famous story of St. Francis amongst the feathered and furred though is a little more anxiety inducing. Word got to Francis that a wolf was terrorizing the people of the town of Gubbio. Allegedly, this wolf was snatching up not only other animals, but people as well. The people had tried to fight it off but constantly lost, and so Francis decided he would take matters into his own hands despite the warnings he received. He went out into the woods to find this wolf and when he found it, the wolf charged at him teeth bared for an attack, however, Francis made the sign of the cross

towards it and the wolf slowed, closing its jaws. Once again, Francis spoke to an animal in the words of the gospel:

“Come to me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Christ, I order you not to hurt anyone. Brother Wolf, I want to make peace between you and the people of Gubbio. They will harm you no more and you must no longer harm them. All past crimes are to be forgiven.”

Allegedly, the wolf nodded its head and proceeded to follow Francis back into town where it sat quietly while Francis preached and then proceeded to live amongst the people of Gubbio as a sort of mascot and communal pet.

Now, there is a certain level of this where these stories have to be treated as apocryphal, taken with a grain of salt, but that doesn't keep them from speaking deeply to who God calls us to be in relationship with creation. We have such a tendency to think that we were here first and because of that we are the only ones worthy of respect, care, and having our needs stewarded. We forget that before God created any ounce of humanity, God lovingly and delicately knit together every other part of creation. Blades of grass, tiny grapes, specks of dirt, particles of the atmosphere, each item fearfully and wonderfully made by their Creator, loved into existence by a parental hand. And even when we do remember that, we like to look at the creation story and say, yeah well, God didn't say that anything was *very* good, until humans came around so ya know, save the best for last. How quickly we forget that humans were the first ones to abandon and shun our

relationship with God, when the last time I checked the whales and the ants aren't openly defying the covenant. God gave us stewardship over all the earth, over every part of creation, and that doesn't mean treating it with reckless abandon, allowing us to do whatever we wish, however we wish. Stewardship is loving care, allowing each thing to fulfill its greatest potential, and that goes for everything from otters to elephants.

The reality is there is so much we can learn from creation, gospel truths that we so frequently ignore or forget. Comfort with change! Who in the church likes change? We're so resistant to it, and yet everyday we are surrounded by examples of evolving with the times and the seasons. Leaves change color and fall, knowing they will bloom again in the spring. Resilience. So often in the church or in our faith, the slightest thing makes us feel like we've been knocked off of our feet with no way to recover. I think about the first hurricane I experienced here—Hurricane Matthew and watching the pine trees outside my house swaying precariously and yet they didn't break, they bent with the wind and moved with it. Slowing down. Our world moves so fast, too fast, and yet nature is like, I am going to take my sweet time. The world will move as it needs to. I mean my word look at bees! Bees function in community better than humans! They operate with teamwork, communication, and an acknowledgement that all serve a

necessary role and purpose for the community to thrive. Nature can even teach us something about worship and our relationship with God. On Palm Sunday, Jesus said that even if the crowds were silenced, the rocks would shout out. Creation itself sings in praise of God. Jesus pointed to the birds of the air, the flowers of the field to show us we don't need to worry about God providing for us, that worry is futile, because all of creation is in God's hands, cared for eternally.

And yet...in the midst of all of this, we think that creation is ours for the taking, ours for the manipulating, ours for the dismantling. As we sit in a country torn apart by a record-setting hurricane, we don't want to talk about climate change and the real impacts of the earth warming. We tear down trees in the name of progress and we destroy habitats thinking that it will have no impact on us besides more space to spread out, until we realize that if we lose the bees, the whole world is in a lot of trouble. How often do we write off those who care for the environment as hippies? Refusing to listen to a message that is truly a gospel message of stewardship and care for all the earth. I mean, the earth literally provides for us, and yet, we aren't willing to give it the same consideration.

The thing about Francis that sticks out is precisely this, consideration and care. Every animal, he addressed as brother or sister, as a fellow

member of creation and community, and we probably hear that and want to snicker like what a nut! But what a deep and abiding respect for the world God created, for the creation breathing in the same oxygen as he is. So why do we think that's funny or ridiculous? From Francis we can learn to pause, to see the world around us through God's eyes, and humble ourselves before it in recognition that God loves every cell of its being in the same way God loves us.

To love creation is to love its Creator and to steward its gifts is to steward the gospel message God has handed over to us to cultivate. We talk so often about kingdom work, forgetting that sometimes spending time out in the fresh air, the sunshine, and the dirt of the earth is kingdom work. Take a deep breath in today and appreciate oxygen that fills your lungs, saying thank you brother wind. Hold the produce you are going to use for dinner in your hand and marvel that it came from the earth, saying thank you sister soil. Love on your pets, give them scratches and treats, saying thank you God for a message of your unconditional love. This world is not our own, but is God's, and it is up to us to treat it with care. Remember those places which give you peace and recognize that they are a part of God's holy work, meant to be cared for, respected, and loved. Francis preached to the animals, go preach to the earth with the stewardship of your hands. **AMEN!!**