

St. Francis – The Right Saint for Right Now (Sermon)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you Lord, our rock & our redeemer. Do you like that mural outside church, the one we're dedicating next Saturday? I love how the little dog has a heart. St. Francis would approve. Animal lovers know their pets have hearts – I know my little dog has a big heart – I'm not so sure how it fits in her little body. And I think even wolves have hearts, and so did St. Francis.

Listen to my story. The citizens of the little town of Gubbio were being attacked by ferocious wolf – oh, a tremendous wolf – it was eating livestock – it had killed a shepherd – it was terrorizing the town. Everyone was so afraid, the mayor sent for St. Francis, the patron of animals, merchants & ecology... and San Francisco... so by extension, us. Surely, he could help.

St. Francis came, he listened, and he prayed. Then he went out to meet the wolf, understanding its wolf nature – the wolf needed to eat. They communicated. Francis explained that these people were made in the image of God, and the wolf explained what had happened, from its point of view. Francis came to an understanding with the wolf: what if they feed you, you don't disturb them anymore? He understood him; he didn't put him down for being a wolf. But he and the wolf came to agree, the wolf just couldn't keep terrorizing the town. Each of us has a little bit of that wolf inside. We say, God loves us as we are and isn't quite finished with us yet... God loves that inner wolf and is ready to tame it and bring out that peaceful puppy, that open heart, and St. Francis was a bringer of that peace. A wolf whisperer.

In his most famous prayer, Francis wrote that I may not so much seek to be understood as to understand. That's what he did. "Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace," Francis wrote, "Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope."

Hope? Yes! He's talking about sowing hope. I see St. Francis as the Patron Saint of Hope. I see him giving us the hope that we can come to an understanding with our inner wolf and connect again with the earth, with each other, as we do each year with the blessing of the animals.

For those of you who don't know him, he was the son of a merchant and rode off to war – like a wolf to hunt – but realized that wasn't his path. He wanted to rebuild a church. His father got mad at him, and it's said he took off all his clothes – everything his father had given him, and cast himself on the mercy of the church, to follow Jesus.

In his prayer, Francis gives us hope that there can be God's peace, here on earth, and that we can be the instruments of that peace. Consider the following: In his time, just as now, there were petty wars. There were dukes and nobles squabbling all over Italy. At any little trespass they'd go to war. Then as now, they weren't the ones getting killed... they sent commoners to fight their petty battles. The



Franciscans put an end to it, without a referendum. Here's their secret sauce: an open-door policy. At first there were two orders of Franciscans: the brothers and the sisters. But people loved St. Francis and wanted to join him, so he responded by creating a third order. Members of a religious order were exempt from war efforts, and soon there weren't enough soldiers to fight all the petty wars. So, what happened? Peace happened! It's like that joke: "What if we had a war and nobody showed up?" But consider who were the peacemakers of this story. The peacemakers were all the commoners. Doesn't that just give you hope? It wasn't some great act of Congress that brought the peace. It was "Everyday Joes," in big numbers. They followed his example of peace, and they all also followed the Prince of Peace.

Francis himself wasn't just tiptoeing through tulips preaching to sparrows and buttercups. He was fierce and unafraid in his peacemaking. He went to the front lines of battle – the crusades, the Christians against Islam. He fully expected to be martyred. He was visiting the caliph of Egypt, Malik-al-Kamil, the nephew of Saladin, to preach the Gospel. The sultan's army captured him, but he was a holy person, and was eventually brought before the sultan. They spent time together, each one recognizing the spirituality in the other – that's pretty radical. He was granted safe passage home and offered gifts. It's said Christian prisoners fared better after that because of this interchange. Imagine. Francis had even offered to walk through flames, if the sultan's priests would follow him. They didn't take him up on it, though. That's how rooted he was in his faith. So much so, he received stigmata – wounds like Christ. So much so, that he wrote a joyful song – the Canticle to Brother Sun & Sister Moon – while very sick. So much so, that he was canonized just two years after death.

Francis lived and died a long time ago – from 1182-1226 – but I say he's the right saint for right now. Remember that town that had the wolf problem? Every town has a wolf problem. St. Francis returned to town with Brother Wolf. He made the case that this could be their "wolf town defender," as long as he lived. This was hard to accept, for those who'd lost loved ones. They discussed it a long time. Was forgiveness possible? A shepherd's widow – who'd lost her husband was the first to bring food. Tears in her eyes, and a lighter heart. Apology accepted. Soon everyone was eating together, celebrating.

You don't have to tackle a 9' wolf to follow St. Francis, though following him is a good way to cultivate your open-hearted inner puppy-dog. Every time you reach out a hand to someone who's in darkness and sow light, you are following him. Every time you sow joy where there is sadness. Every time you choose to understand, to console, to love, to give pardon. This makes you more fully human, and brings you closer to Jesus, our Lord and Savior, and you're following St. Francis. And so, in the blessed hope that we can and will connect to our inner peacemaker we boldly ask, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace now and all the days of our lives." And to that, all the people say....
AMEN!

