

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 26, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

St. Francis Day Celebration

St. Francis Day in the Church's liturgical calendar is set for October 4 so, you might well ask, why are we here at St. Mark's Chapel observing this annual celebration a full week earlier? Well, there are three reasons:

1. I'm going to be out of town on October 3, the nearest Sunday to October 4,
2. Colton Smith will be the guest Celebrant that day and I really didn't want to surprise him with a church full of animals, and, most importantly,
3. I wouldn't have missed this three-ring circus for the world!

It is so great to see the chaotically wonderful collection of squirming, panting, and tail wagging creatures among us this day. What a celebration this is of God's creative hand and what a graphic reminder it provides that we are but stewards in God's Kingdom. God has entrusted to our care the well being of the whole earth, of which our pets are a constant and immediate reminder. As we, daily, offer and receive their loyalty and affection, we have a foretaste of the unity and harmony which God intends the whole universe one day to know and share. That vision is such a profound gift, isn't it just like God, in divine humor, to present it to us in the unassuming form of fur, feather, and fin?

Now, just a word about the connection of all this with St. Francis. From all the pious mythology surrounding this brown-robed birdlover from the Middle Ages, you may have the notion that St. Francis was kind of a simpleton who cared more about trees and animals than he did about anything else. I have to tell you that he has often been wrongly sentimentalized as a kind of twelfth-century hippie dropout from the real world. The reality is that he was very much concerned about and involved in the life of the world—the priorities and assumptions of kingdoms and of the institutional church. His life challenged and changed all of the social and religious assumptions of his world. His vision was that mankind wrongly compartmentalizes reality. We try to separate the material from the spiritual, the worthwhile from the frivolous, the realistic from the impractical, the significant from the insignificant. To St. Francis the whole creation is ONE—a wonderful blending of everything, completely inseparable and interdependent. His vision is that we are called to bless and embrace all of God's gifts, all of the time—even, and especially, those seemingly ordinary and inconsequential things that we take for granted, things that are all around us like birds, flowers, cats, and dogs.

Francis was a wonderfully spontaneous and passionate person. Full of humility and without judging anyone else, he simply lived his life by showing respect, compassion, mercy, and justice. He gave away riches and social standing and was willing for others to think him a failure and a fool. He didn't write books, he wrote songs. He didn't pass laws to raise taxes to improve the community, he freely gave generously and personally of everything he owned to help those in

need. He didn't seek any honors or titles; he let his life serve as a demonstration of the power of love. He didn't make speeches, he simply took direct action for the poor, the homeless, and the suffering. His entire claim to be a follower of Christ is summed up in his now famous quotation: "Carry the Gospel into the whole world, and use words **if you have to.**"

St. Francis most often communicated his Faith in God's love by showing us how that unconditional caring is reflected in our relationship with the simple creatures whom we invite into our lives and homes. Your dog or your cat or your fish or your canary really doesn't care whether you are rich, famous, or brilliant. Yet those pets look up to you with constant affection and trust. As someone has said, "Would that I were half the man my dogs think that I am."

In our companionship with our pets we discover what it means to let go of all the trappings of life (notice that word "trappings"—the things that entrap us by making us utterly dependent on temporary, wasteful material things). The only things that our dog, Katie owns in all the world are her collar and her dog dish yet she is unfailingly happy. That's a great lesson that all of us need to pay attention to. We need to discover that authentically worthwhile values—those things that really matter—are actually not achievement at all. They are gifts which come to us freely from the hand of God whenever we focus our lives not on acquiring things but on giving of ourselves. Like the "Rich Young Ruler" of Scripture, we may think that we have everything but we still feel empty and unfulfilled. He had too much of the world's good for his own good. He was too concerned about how well he was doing to even think about doing well. In letting go of the notion that we are defined by what we **do**, we are liberated to be who we truly **are**.

St. Francis shows us what it means to make of your life a work of art. St. Francis challenges each one of us to take a hard look at our own life; to decide what it is that delights and satisfies, and then to give your heart fully to that, like the sunflower tracks the face of the sun through the sky. Give your passion room in your life and your heart. You, your world, your family, your garden, and your pet are all sacred in the eyes of God. Open yourself to that great truth and that truth will, indeed, set you free.