

Today we are celebrating the feast of St. Francis,
probably best known,
at least in children's stories and iconography
as the guy who talked with the animals and preached to the birds.
The sweet man in the robe who watches over our gardens.

Online this week, one of my colleagues said something to the effect of,
"Sigh, the Feast of St. Francis! I wonder if there will be one sermon
preached that is not all about the animals, and that instead focuses on
his passion for justice?"

Another responded, "aren't they the same thing?"

So here's what I see when I read stories of St. Francis:

I see a young man, who grew up in the lap of luxury,
an adventurous and frivolous son of a wealthy clothing merchant.
He went off to war, was captured, ransomed by his family
and, while recovering from an illness, had a spiritual awakening.

And, perhaps like someone who realizes
that drugs or alcohol have become
the controlling power in their life,
he saw that to respond honestly to his renewed faith,
he needed to leave all the trappings of his class and privilege.

While praying at a crumbling church in San Damiano,
he heard a voice instructing him to "rebuild my church."
He initially took this call literally, financing the project
by selling off goods in his father's cloth warehouse.
Not surprisingly, his father was not amused
and had his son arrested.

Francis repaid the money in full,
and in a part of the story that lives on in legend,
he stripped off his clothing in the public square and,
laying his fine clothes at the feet of his father,
he denounced his position.

It's not clear what his Bishop thought of this,
but he provided Francis with a plain peasant's smock,
and the young man's transformation,
at least outwardly, was complete.

He surely could have found a more private
and less dramatic way
to leave his family and wealth behind,
but in making such a public vow,
whether the community welcomed it or not,
he had witnesses to his intention.

And we know he had an impact
– his pledge, and his call to others to join him
resulted in plenty of ridicule from the leaders of the town,
but before long,
he was joined by a dozen formerly wealthy young men,
who formed the beginning of the “Friars Minor.”

They focused their service toward the sick and the poor
– people Francis had previously avoided with great distaste.

And, despite (or perhaps because of)
his prior adventures as a soldier,
Francis firmly opposed violence in all forms,
including the crusades which were raging across Europe at the time.

Francis carried himself lightly
– he was happy to be considered a “holy fool”
and was liberal with his praise for God and all of Creation.

His most famous song, The Canticle of Creation,
helps us look at the world around us as a holy family.
It goes like this:

O Most High, all-powerful, good Lord God,
to you belong praise, glory,
honor and all blessing.
Be praised, my Lord, for all your creation
and especially for our Brother Sun,
who brings us the day and the light;
he is strong and shines magnificently.
O Lord, we think of you when we look at him.
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon,
and for the stars
which you have set shining and lovely
in the heavens.
Be praised, my Lord,
for our Brothers Wind and Air
and every kind of weather
by which you, Lord,
uphold life in all your creatures.
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water,

who is very useful to us,
and humble and precious and pure.
Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,
through whom you give us light in the darkness:
he is bright and lively and strong.
Be praised, my Lord,
for Sister Earth, our Mother,
who nourishes us and sustains us,
bringing forth
fruits and vegetables of many kinds
and flowers of many colors.
Be praised, my Lord,
for those who forgive for love of you;
and for those
who bear sickness and weakness
in peace and patience
- you will grant them a crown.
Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Death,
whom we must all face.
I praise and bless you, Lord,
and I give thanks to you,
and I will serve you in all humility.

Francis lived 44 years
– a pretty long time for someone in the late 10th/early 11th Centuries.

He spent the second half of his life in a world so different
from his upbringing – sleeping outside, begging for food...
and he did this with great delight.

By God's grace, he let go of what distracted him
from the freedom of faith.

And, by joining in faithful community with others
who shared his pledge and no doubt helped him remain faithful,
he became a light not only for his age, but for
generations and generations to follow.

May the witness of Francis help us to identify
what we need to lay down,
so that we may take up God's gentle and merciful yoke,
that we, too, may be made new again.
Amen.