

As a Child
A Homily on the Feast Day of St. Francis
Rev. Chris Glaser
Virginia Highland Church – Atlanta, Georgia
October 4, 2009 – Season of Pentecost
Texts: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 10:13-16

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For those of you who are eyeing with envy those of us who have pets, I want to suggest that the Atlanta Humane Society and other shelters have many homeless creatures that need you to be Saint Francis!

Years ago, I was surprised to learn that the Atlanta Humane Society was first organized to protect from abuse and advance the rights not only of animals, but of women and children as well. Animals, women, and children were the vulnerable creatures of that time, even as they were in Jesus' time.

Our story from Genesis reminds us that God's rainbow covenant was not just for humankind but for all the creatures of the earth. In Jesus' sermon on the mount, he reminds us of God's care of all of us by citing the unsurpassed beauty in which God clothes the lilies of field who neither toil nor spin and how God feeds the birds of the air who neither sow nor reap. In his sermon to the birds, Saint Francis of Assisi alludes to this sign of God's Providence.

Today's Gospel reading highlights Jesus' care for children. "People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them," Mark says, "and the disciples spoke sternly to them." Maybe the disciples considered children unclean or just bothersome. But Jesus did not. Scripture says he was "indignant," and lifts up children's status by declaring, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them: for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

What's interesting in the text is that this recognition of the sacred status of children follows on the heels of Jesus defending the rights of women in his declaration a few verses earlier, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery." Jesus was not defending marriage, he was defending women of his time who were being wantonly divorced so that their husbands could marry other women. So we have two stories together of Jesus speaking up for the rights of the most vulnerable of his society and of ours.

But he takes it a step further when he says to his disciples and thus to us, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And then he takes “them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”

The Greek author and lifelong spiritual seeker Nikos Kazantzakis, in his book *Zorba the Greek*, observes that both artists and children see things “as if for the first time.” Now, I would interpret artists not just as visual artists, but also poets, performers, scientists, inventors, engineers, filmmakers—any profession that requires imagination. In fact, it’s hard to think of any occupation that doesn’t require imagination!

Along with children, they are at their best when they see things as if for the first time. This freshness of vision, a vision without prejudice or jadedness, is required for both the creative process of artists and the growth process of children. But I would add another category to artists and children, that of mystics. Mystics see the world and God, creation and creatures and human community “as if for the first time” as they cast aside prejudice and jadedness to embrace imagination with artists and welcome growth with children. Surely Noah saw the world as if for the first time after The Flood. And Jesus helped his disciples see the world as if for the first time in the light of the inbreaking kingdom of God.

Perhaps no mystic was so imaginative and so playfully childlike than Saint Francis, who hugged a leper and saw Jesus, who preached to a tree and made it blossom, who gathered the birds of the air for a sermon, who could befriend a wild animal and keep it from killing villagers, who could call earth, wind, fire, earth, sun, and moon mother and brother and sister, who recognized poverty as class, and regarded popes, beggars, and robbers equally.

According, again, to the imaginative writer Kazantzakis in his book on Saint Francis, this little saint even saw the devil differently. To his companion Brother Leo he says, “Do not lose heart, Brother Leo, “ he told him, stroking his head. “Stand on your feet, and if the Tempter has straddled you, have no fears: the gates [of heaven] will open, and the two of you will enter together!”

Brother Leo exclaims, “The Tempter too! He’ll enter [the gates of heaven] too? How do you know, Brother Francis?”

To which Francis replies, “I know because of my heart, which opens and receives everything. Surely paradise must be the same.” [Saint Francis, by Nikos Kazantzakis, p 288-9 (Chicago: Loyola Classics, 2005)] Yes, a mystic sees everything and everyone as if for the first time.

When people ask me if pets go to heaven, I think of the story from an old TV program that I saw as a child in which, after death, an old man and his dog walk down a road and are welcomed at the gate of what the old man believes to be heaven. But he's told "no dogs allowed," and walks further down the road, disappointed but unwilling to part with his dear companion. He comes upon another gate, at which both he and his dog are welcomed. "I'd rather be in hell with my dog than in heaven without him," he comments as he proceeds through the gate. The gatekeeper corrects him, "Oh no, the other place was hell. This is heaven!"

During my morning prayers one day, I glanced down into the round brown eyes of the dog who chose me as a companion one day in Grant Park, and I realized, no matter what our achievements have been as human beings, none is so great as making a creature as simple as a dog. Yes, I suppose we can breed dogs and clone dogs, but we are not able to make one from scratch—no pun intended. However my dog Hobbes came to be—she is a miracle and a gift of grace from a source deeper, further, greater than anything humanity can achieve. She is a mystic, a child, and an artist who helps me see the world as if for the first time.

That's what Jesus saw in children, what we see in Saint Francis, and what Saint Francis saw in all earthly creatures. Children, mystics, and animals are all wordless sermons and sacraments that help us see the world and ourselves anew. If we attend to them as we attend to worship, we will hear the song of heaven and see the light of God.