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## The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

What could those insane vineyard workers have been thinking? It's a question we ask again and again when we witness something we cannot understand - the murderous behavior behavior of the vineyard workers, the vicious murderer in Las Vegas.

What leads people to commit such desperate acts of violence? For the vineyard workers, we're offered a simple excuse – they wanted the vineyard for themselves. But, really that doesn't completely explain their actions, does it? And, nothing can really explain what happened in Las Vegas. Not so we can understand it.

But I believe a part of the answer to such acts is separation – the illusion of our separateness from God, from God's Creation, and from one another. Separation from the life God created us for. When we forget who we are and whose we are it can lead us to act in ways that harm ourselves and often harm others. It is what Jesus was trying to get across in this and many other parables. Jesus' whole life was about trying to remind us that it is separation from God, from ourselves, and from others that leads to death; and it is in conscious unity that we find our greatest happiness, our true treasure, and the fullness of life.

However, people who live their lives **in** conscious unity with God, with Creation, and with their fellows, can also be seen as crazy. Those who live a life sharing the extravagant love of God are often considered irrational.

And, today we celebrate that holy craziness, as we bless animals in honor of St. Francis of Assisi. Bringing animals into church is crazy. When they join us, chaos lurks beneath the surface. We're all wondering, will the dogs chase the cats, the cats chase the hamsters, and the birds and other creatures scatter in all directions? Or more accurately, **when** will all that happen? But celebrating the Feast of St. Francis with our companion animals, though crazy, makes us more aware of the fact that all relationship involves risk, and that the God who

risked everything for us calls us into relationship anyway -- with him, and with all Creation, the infinitely varied works of the divine hands. During his own lifetime, many people thought Francesco Bernardone was insane. They thought he was crazy when, as a young man, he stripped naked in the town square to renounce his inheritance in front of his parents, the bishop and the entire population of Assisi. And when he kissed and hugged lepers, cleaning their wounds with his ungloved hands.

They thought he was crazy when he preached to the birds, calling them his “little sisters” and remarking that they paid better attention to the Gospel than people did. And later, when he founded an order grounded in the belief that the followers of Jesus could live as Jesus had, owning nothing, begging for what they needed and trusting God to provide for them

The rich thought Francis was crazy because he refused to distinguish between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor. He loved and gave to everyone who begged from him -- money or food if he had any, or a smile and a kind word if he had nothing else to offer.

People who were not wealthy couldn't understand why Francis wouldn't condemn the selfishness of the rich; instead, he asked his wealthy sisters and brothers simply to open their hearts to the Spirit's call and respond as their consciences commanded.

And political and religious leaders thought he was crazy when he went to Egypt to meet the Sultan on a mission of peace to end the murderous Crusades.

Even though many of his contemporaries venerated him as a saint, almost everything Francis did was interpreted as a sign that he had lost his mind. And, Francis didn't argue with them. **He openly admitted that he was a fool**, but not just any kind of fool. He was fool enough to believe that Jesus actually meant his followers to live as he taught, regardless of the price.

“Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.”

“Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.”

“If your brother or sister sins against you, forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven times.”

For 2,000 years, learned theologians have tried to explain away these teachings. But Francis was no theologian, and when Francis experienced his conversion, he was free to respond by letting his whole life embody the Gospel. He became one of the “infants” Jesus mentions in the Gospel, people who know that the risen Christ is with us and will sustain us as we seek to live as the body of Christ in the world.

Francis called his friends, and he calls us, to join him in a life of conscious unity with God and Creation, an adventurous life of love. It is in this life that we find the truest response to the insanity that we often see in the world. It was an insanity that Francis faced every day in Medieval Italy - warring nation states, extreme poverty, rampant disease. Fear, hatred, and violence. And, Francis’ response was to love as Jesus commanded.

The Feast of St. Francis is a day to bless animals and to ask God’s forgiveness for our mistreatment of them and of the Earth, the home we share with them. It’s a day to bless the poor, a day to bless our enemies, and a day to bless holy fools who are crazy enough to believe that God’s heavenly kingdom has come, holy fools crazy enough to open a church to strangers for a children’s clinic once a month, crazy enough to want to protect animals in danger of becoming extinct, or to want to stop gun violence in our country, or to want to welcome refugees of chaos and war in other nations. It’s a day for holy fools who believe hatred is best met with love, and that it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned, and in dying that we are born into life eternal.

On his deathbed Francis offered his friends a final prayer: “I have done what is mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours to do.” May Christ teach us what crazy gospel acts may be ours to do. And may God give us the grace to accomplish those things as wholeheartedly, and as single-mindedly, as Francis did.