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Lectionary Year C: Matthew 11:25-30

The connection between St. Francis and the animal kingdom has received significant attention in recent decades because people have realized what an impact our (usually) four-legged companions have on our hearts, minds, and souls. And the data would show that their impact is overwhelmingly positive. But I don't believe St. Francis himself was simply a monastic who loved animals; rather, he was something of a revolutionary who believed, among other things, that human beings ought to live in harmony with creation and care for it as God's precious gift.

Today, we bring part of God's creation into our worship that isn't ordinarily here, and we may hear sounds and feel energies that we aren't accustomed to. Some of this might be distracting or upset our concentration, but one could point out that living in harmony with God's creation involves letting creation be among us rather than shutting it out. Of course, creation challenges us at times with pests whose only purpose, apparently, is to spread disease and make our lives miserable.

But creation has a way of taking care of that, too. Say, for example, a large city is overrun by feral cats, to the point that they've become a real nuisance and, perhaps, a threat to public health and safety. As the local authorities see their beloved

city become a litter box, they decide "enough is enough" and undertake a massive effort to exterminate all of these pesky feral cats. Once that job is done, everyone breathes a sigh of relief because the city is so much-cleaner and safer.

For a while...

Now the city has been overtaken by rats and mice, because they no longer have the feral cat as their predator. Thus, a smarter solution to a feral cat problem would be to spay and neuter as many cats as possible, but, apart from that, leave them alone and let them do their job. Creation, in this case, needs only a relatively small human intervention to bring back in balance something that was out of whack. But things like that work themselves out when we're willing to work with creation instead of against it.

This, I believe, is in keeping with the example of Francis of Assisi. Work with (or in harmony with) creation instead of against it. Care for it rather than plunder it. Try not to consume more than you produce. Francis grew up in a wealthy family but later discovered that having nothing -- or, at the most, very little -- offered him more peace and contentment than all the riches in the world ever could offer. Most importantly, his poverty brought him closer to Jesus, in whom he could discover blessings through emulating Jesus' own sacrifice.

In this morning's Gospel text, Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you,

and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). In this saying, Jesus is using an image that would've been familiar to most in the ancient world -- farmers, especially. The image of a yoke calls to mind a device that keeps two oxen together, so that they can pull a cart or an implement behind them in tandem. So when Jesus speaks of a yoke, it's in the form of an invitation to be "yoked" with him...or held together with him in tandem. But this is not for the pulling of some heavy load; on the contrary, it's "easy" and a relatively "light" load.

As that pertains to the commemoration of St. Francis of Assisi, we can conclude that Francis took these words to heart. He, indeed, became yoked with Christ by following his life and example. He became yoked, as well, to creation by living in harmony with it. And if wealth could be used to distance or insulate himself from creation, poverty would then have the opposite effect. Why, for example, would someone today who has a decent home with comfortable beds and heating and air conditioning go on a camping trip and live like a hobo for a week? Maybe all those comforts of that decent home don't allow this person the connection to creation that is necessary once in a while! Now, if one were a true Franciscan, one would be content to live as if on a camping trip indefinitely. Speaking personally, I would not be one of these people.

But I think that any Franciscan would freely admit that the life

of St. Francis isn't for everyone!

We can do smaller things, though, like keep pets, tend a garden, or take a stroll on a quiet evening through the woods or meadows and thereby discover our own ways of living in harmony with creation. When we bless our animals today, we acknowledge that we are called to live side-by-side with them and are recipients of the blessing that they can be to us. May we remember, too, to work with them instead of against them.

God has given us a creation -- and creatures -- to care for rather than plunder and to bless rather than exploit. Look at the creatures you brought with you today, and treat every other living thing you encounter with the same care, and then you'll see what it means to be an inheritor of St. Francis' legacy. And you'll most certainly be yoked thereby to the witness and example of Christ. He will continue to teach you how to live within his Father's creation. Work against him, and it will surely be difficult and heavy. Work with him, and it will even more surely be easy and light.

Amen.