

In Nomine.

Today is the Feast of St Francis of Assisi.

Ok – I know – for those who are liturgical scholars, the rubrics of the prayer book tell us that lesser feasts NEVER take precedence over a Sunday celebration, and therefore this Feast is actually transferred to tomorrow, or the next ‘open’ day that has no other feast on it. I accept that, and point out that I did not change the lectionary for St Francis. The lessons for today, are really the lessons for today.

But, all that taken into consideration, today, October 4, is the day that the Church traditionally celebrates the Feast of St Francis, and we recognize that, by having a blessing of the animals following the liturgy this morning.

Around this time, it is becoming quite the norm that churches of various flavors conduct pet blessings/blessings of the animals (I wonder about whether some of the animals are really pets)...and we usually see at least one or two pictures in local newspapers of the churches blessing animals. It has become quite popular.

I recall my first ‘awakening’ to blessing of animals.

I was a relatively new priest, and some parishioners came to me and said that St Francis was their favorite saint, and would I consider a blessing of the animals on his feast day? I said yes, and went along my merry way.

But, there are no liturgies for the blessing of animals – not in the Book of Common Prayer, not in the Lesser Feasts and Fasts, not in the Book of Occasional Services. They are found nowhere, so I began to panic.

I finally decided to call the diocesan liturgical officer, and ask his advice. He answered his phone, and I told him what I needed.

After a period of silence that I thought was his pondering, he started to speak.

“St. Francis is one of the greatest Saints in the history of the Church. He came from an extremely wealthy family. He found Jesus in his life, and went to the center of the town square. Stripped off all his clothes, and publicly renounced all of his family’s worldly goods. He professed his faith and life in Jesus, and followed Christ with all that he had. And now, you have made him the patron saint of puppy dogs and kitty cats.”

I was appropriately put in my place.

He then went on to help me construct a liturgy for the blessing of animals.

The liturgical officer was right, but I have to admit, this continues to build interest, as the Church continues to recognize God’s grace, goodness and blessing in all aspects of creation.

St Francis- often imitated, never duplicated.

With that in mind, that St Francis truly lived his life completely devoted to Christ, and shined forth in all that he did his love for Christ, I would like to repeat part of some sermons that I have recently been preaching:

Brothers and Sisters, we are a Sacramental Church. We celebrate the Sacraments that have been passed down through the Church Catholic for 2000 years.

So – how many Sacraments are there? _____ 7

What are they?

Holy Eucharist

Baptism

Confirmation

Unction

Holy Matrimony

Ordination

Reconciliation

I was always taught that there were 7 Sacraments. The 1979 Book of Common Prayer states that there are 2 Sacraments, and 5 Sacramental Rites. The two Sacraments being Eucharist and Baptism, and the 5 Sacramental Rites being the others.

What is the text book definition of a Sacrament?

A Sacrament is...an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace (given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.)

An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

That which we can hold, feel, touch, taste or grasp, which points to something that we can't hold, feel, touch or taste. It is something that points beyond itself, to the love, presence and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

So, in the two 'Great Sacraments,' what are the outward and visible signs?

For Eucharist, it is the Bread and wine.

The inward and Spiritual grace is the presence of Christ, the Body and Blood received by the people, and received by faith.

For Baptism, the outward and visible sign is...

Water – poured over the head of the individual, be it infant or adult.

The inward and Spiritual grace is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family (The Church) forgiveness of sins and new life in the Holy Spirit. – now that's a lot!

Outward and visible sign – inward and spiritual grace.

For ordination – outward and visible sign – the laying on of hands by the bishop. Inward and spiritual grace? Reception of the Holy Spirit, empowering the person for ministry!

And we could go on, and on.

Now, if the text book definition of a sacrament is, “an outward and visible sign, of an inward and spiritual grace,’ and this points to the greater glory of God, and God’s grace, we can look to see exactly where those graces lie.

The Catechism asks if God’s activity is limited to these Rites, and of course, as you can imagine, God’s power cannot be limited to anything. God can do anything God wants, in whatever way God wants to do them. So the Sacraments are not the only way by which God acts. But they are a way we see God’s salvific actions, and God’s miraculous presence.

As someone once told me, there are possibly ‘infinitely many’ Sacraments in this world.

(Please, I’m not officially teaching this, as I don’t want to get in trouble for preaching heresy, but...)

If there are infinitely many Sacraments, then we can see God’s grace (love) in everything we do – from watching a beautiful sunrise, to sitting on the beach, enjoying a cool breeze, to walking hand in hand with someone we love, to, catching and reeling in a 15 pound bass, from the stream in Hampshire County.

God’s grace is everywhere, and every aspect of our lives points to this. Infinitely many Sacraments.

Or, as someone said to me, if a Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, then perhaps there is only one Sacrament.

That Sacrament, that outward and visible sign that points to God’s grace and love would be all of Creation.

The Doctrine of Creation says that God created for one purpose only, because God loved and loves.

If that’s true (and I believe it to be) then indeed, there is only one Sacrament – all of creation, everything we see and do, is wrapped up in the grace and love of God. All that there is, this whole shebang is God’s grace poured out for us, and is the Great Sacrament.

Now, if there’s 1 Sacrament, or if there are infinitely many Sacraments, or if there are 7 Sacraments, or if there are 2 Sacraments, and 5 Sacramental Rites, somehow we live and participate in those Sacraments.

We are active participants in the Sacraments of Christ – either by living and being one, or by consuming and participating in them.

Each Sunday, we gather to celebrate at least one of the Sacraments of Jesus Christ – the Eucharist.

Today, we gather in this space, around an altar, formed as a community, to ask God to again break into Creation in a new, and renewing fashion, in Body and Blood, in Bread and Wine. And we faithful Christians gathered, believe that God is present in this Bread and Wine, made Body and Blood by faith.

The Sacrament, the outward and visible sign of God's grace, is brought here, and in a few minutes we will go to various stations around the Church to stretch out our hands, and receive this precious gift, and say "I believe."

The Eucharistic Prayer C, which we prayed yesterday, reminds us of what we are about to participate in, by having us pray (via the priest/presider) "open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name."

This Eucharist is for transformation.

To Transform us from receivers to doers.

We receive the Body of Christ, and drink the blood of Christ, in order to become a deeper part of the Sacrament of Christ.

What does that mean, to become the Sacrament of Christ?

For us, it means that we become the Outward and Visible sign of God's love and presence in this world. We become the image of God. We become the Imago Dei.

Some time ago, there was a group of women in a Bible Study on the book of Malachi. As they were studying chapter three, they came across verse three, which says: "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." This verse puzzled the women and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God. One of the women offered to find out about the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible study. That week, this woman called up a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest in silver beyond her own curiosity about the process of refining silver. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were the hottest as to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God, holding us in such a hot spot – then she thought again about the verse, that He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver. She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the hot fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left even a moment too long in the flames, the silver would be destroyed.

The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, “How do you know when the silver is fully refined?” He smiled at her and answered, “Oh, that’s easy – when I see my image in it.”

If today you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that God has His eye on you and will keep watching you until He sees His image in you...until God sees the completion of how Jesus has transformed us.

Amen.