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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W39
St. Francis Day 8:30 a.m., 11:00 a.m. Eucharist, 3:00 p.m. Evensong
Sunday 2 October 2016

Jer. 22:13-16
Canticle 12
Gal. 6:14-18
Mt. 11:25-30

The Really Real

"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11).

In twelfth century Europe when universities came into existence, the first professors were consumed by a question that might seem odd to us. You could call it the problem of universals.

They wondered, whether particular objects in the physical world are the primary existing entity, or, if what really matters is the general class to which they belong. For example, are particular people what is real and the idea of humanity comes from summing up all the individuals, or is "humanity" the real thing in which individuals participate.¹

Nominalists were the ones who believed in the particulars. Realists thought that what mattered most were the general categories of things. William of Ockham (1285-1347), the nominalist credited as the source for Ockham's Razor, proposed what we call the law of parsimony. This is the principle that arguments should be as simple as possible. He argues convincingly that in most cases referring to a universal does not add anything to our understanding.

Today in our individualistic world we have difficulty even understanding the realist position. Some claim that nominalist ideas lie at the heart of the Protestant Reformation and have in effect won the argument.² Our scientific methods, democratic political system, even capitalism arise out of this faith in the reality of the particular. It is hard for us today to even think like those realists and perhaps this makes it difficult to recognize all the ways that we participate in something larger than our selves.³

This morning we celebrate the feast of our city's patron saint Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226). Francis speaks to us from this time when truth, humanity, virtue and the cosmos had a more substantial kind of reality than they do today. He took the twelfth century philosophical question "What is real?" and reframed it. Everything that Francis did and taught answered the question, "Where should our attention be if we want to grasp the most significant thing about God, the world and ourselves?"⁴

The historian Diarmuid MacCulloch calls Francis “the playboy son of an Italian millionaire.”⁵ Indeed you could imagine Francis starting out life as the son of a prosperous silk merchant going off to win honor by fighting in a war. He lived to impress and to experience all the pleasures of life like a college fraternity man driving around in his father’s red Lamborghini.

The lepers in town thoroughly frightened and repulsed him. One day he realized that he was the one who needed healing, not them. He went over and hugged one of these outcasts and from that point on he made himself a kind of outcast for Christ. He writes, “that which was bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body.”⁶ This transformed Francis horrified his father, but attracted thousands of others. He had discovered what was real.

Francis taught his friends that the most significant thing about our existence is not your position, career, accomplishments, possessions, attractiveness, longevity or health. Instead it is really being alive, noticing our connections to others and feeling gratitude for our existence.

In short reality has nothing to do with how special we are, our particular situation or isolation. What matters is our participation in the natural world. Nature is not some distraction from a deeper more spiritual existence. It is where we meet God.

On St. Francis Day we remember that we experience divinity in our pets. They show us that there are other ways to exist and experience the world. In his book *Dog Sense* John Bradshaw writes that dogs are both more and less intelligent than we expect. On the one hand they are such experts at reading our nonverbal behavior that they are able to know how we are feeling and predict what we will do better than we can. At the same time dogs are also more trapped in the moment. They have difficulty understanding the consequences of their actions. Our pets show us that love does not just belong to human beings.⁷

Yesterday our dog Poppy thought that we had all left for the day. She didn’t realize that our daughter was in the backyard. When Melia looked up she saw Poppy sunbathing on the kitchen table. Poppy was mortified. She was not afraid of punishment. She just did not want to do anything that would hurt her relations to our family.

Francis experienced a kind of deep connection with all nature. One of the most beautiful features of our Cathedral is the Rose window at the east end of the nave. At twenty-five feet in diameter with 3,800 pieces of glass it is the largest rose window in Western

America.⁸ The artist Gabriel Loire dedicated it to the oldest poem in colloquial Italian, Francis' song "The Canticle of the Sun."

Let me read just a short selection from the Canticle. "Be praised, my Lord, through all Your Creatures, / especially through my lord Brother Sun, / who brings the day; and You give light through him. / And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! / Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness."

"Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; / in the heavens You made them bright, precious and beautiful. // Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, / and clouds and storms, and all the weather, / through which You give Your creatures sustenance. // Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water; / she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure."

"Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, / through whom You brighten the night. / He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong. // Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, / who feeds us and rules us, / and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs..."⁹

I have found inspiration in another saint from this period, the Sufi mystic Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273). Rumi's followers affectionately refer to him as the Maulana or master. As a Muslim he lived in Konya (a city in present day Turkey) at the crossroads of the world. This brought him into close contact with Jews and Christians. He respected other faiths and learned from other forms of wisdom.

Above all, Rumi is someone deeply in love with God. He describes himself as a kind of reed cut from the banks of a stream and carefully trimmed by God into a flute.¹⁰ His profound music, created by the breath of God, continues to inspire us all these centuries later.

In 1219 St. Francis traveled to Egypt to bring peace in the wake of the Fifth Crusade. Sometimes I imagine him taking a detour on the way home to meet with the teenaged Rumi in Turkey. Just as the Franciscan monks look to Francis as their spiritual leader, the whirling dervishes find their inspiration in Rumi.

Francis and Rumi share a kind of freedom in ecstatic mystical union with God. Nature is not dead to them but full of God's love and care and beauty. Nature has so much more than enough for us to find our home. Rumi writes,

“An ant hurries along a threshing floor / with its wheat grain, moving between huge stacks / of wheat, not knowing the abundance all around. It thinks its one grain / is all there is to love. // So we choose a tiny seed to be devoted to. / This body, one path or one teacher. / Look wider and farther. // The essence of every human being can see, / and what that essence-eye takes in, / the being becomes...”

“The ocean pours through a jar, / and you might say it swims inside / the fish! This mystery gives peace to / your longing and makes the road home home.”¹¹

Jesus teaches that in a sense there is nothing easier than being the child of God that you were created to be. He says “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11). This week as homework let’s receive this gift. Try to leave behind the particulars and do something to experience the whole, to meet God in nature.

Fall in love again with your pet. Spend time with Sister Moon and the stars. Set down that one seed you are devoted to, so that you can see the abundance all around. Let God’s ocean pour through you. Discover again what is really real.

¹ Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2005) 151-2.

² “The nominalist doctrine is considered a significant source of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.” Leszek Kolakowski, *Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing: 23 Questions from Great Philosophers* tr. Agnieszka Kolakowski (NY: Penguin, 2007) 92.

³ Robert Hass’ poem Meditation at Lagunitas reminds me how difficult it is to put ourselves in this frame of mind. “All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking. / The idea, for example, that each particular erases / the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown- / faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk / of that black birch is, by his presence, / some tragic falling off from a first world / of undivided light. Or the other notion that, / because there is in this world no one thing / to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds, / a word is elegy to what it signifies...”

⁴ Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2005) 159.

⁵ Diarmuid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (NY: Viking, 2010) 403.

⁶ Quoted from *The Flowers of St. Francis* in Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2005) 160.

⁷ John Bradshaw, *Dog Sense: How the New Science of Dog Behavior Can Make You a Better Friend to Your Pet* (NY: Basic Books, 2011) xxii.

⁸ Michael Lampen, *Grace Cathedral Sourcebook* (SF: Grace Cathedral, 2015) 13.

⁹ St. Francis of Assisi, “Canticle of the Sun,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canticle_of_the_Sun

¹⁰ I am so grateful to Annemarie Schimmel one of my favorite teachers of all time for teaching me Rumi. Annemarie Schimmel, *I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala Books, 1992) 26.

¹¹ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing* tr. Coleman Banks (SF: Harper San Francisco, 2003) 21.