

October 1, 2017  
The Feast of St. Francis

Psalm 148:7–14  
Matthew 11:25–30

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*“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”*

You know, every morning when my dog Bailey gets up and sees me for the first time each day, he has this special look. His ears tuck back just so, his eyes light up, his mouth opens and he does his perfect dog-smile. His whole body shakes in joy as though I am the best person he has ever seen. It rubs off. I start feeling pretty good about myself. And he does that for every body in the house. I know in that moment he would do just about anything for us if he could. Bailey is a gentle giant. A little too clumsy for his own good. But you are never in doubt about how much he loves you.

That’s the rest we all need. That’s the gentleness we are so hungry for. To know we are cared for and loved and that we aren’t alone in this world. Some days, animals are our best reminder of what that means.

Today we commemorate the Feast of St. Francis. In the Episcopal church this is one of our Lesser Feasts and Fasts, one of the days when we remember those impactful individuals who lived a life worth learning from...A person who understood very deeply what it meant to be a Christian, and St. Francis was certainly one of those individuals. Even though we bring our animals to be blessed, this day is about much more. Francis was not only a lover of animals but he was a peace builder, an outspoken advocate of the poor, a compassionate man who gave of himself wherever he could lessen the burden of someone else. He wanted people to know they were cared for.

When we read the Prayer of St. Francis, we hear a mission statement of sorts. A directive about how this man lived and about how we might live as well with a gentle and kind spirit.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.*

Make me that kind of instrument for others. So, as we gather today, I invite you to think about the ways we walk together when we are weary, when our burdens are too heavy. Those times we are desperate for love. When we are hungry for faith, hope and joy.

There is an excerpt from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard that I want to read to you. Annie Dillard is a master of noticing gentleness. She spends hours walking in nature to see the lessons that emerge. She writes:

*“...Last September I was walking across a gravel path in full sunlight, when I nearly stepped on a grasshopper. I poked its leg with a twig to see it hop, but no hop came. So I crouched down low on my hands and knees, and sure enough, her swollen ovipositor was sunk into the gravel. She was pulsing faintly...and her right antenna was broken off near the base. She’d been around. I thought of her in the Lucas meadow, too, where so many grasshoppers leaped about me. One of those was very conspicuously lacking one of its big, springlike hind legs – a grass-lunger. It seemed to move fairly well from here to there, but then of course I didn’t know where it had been aiming.”*

I love the story of the grass-lunger. That broken, tired, yet determined little grasshopper trying to get somewhere that we can’t quite see. But, he’s trying. His burden is heavy. We watch, assuming he’s doing OK, that he will manage, that he’s making progress. But, the reality is that we didn’t know where he was aiming. If he could speak, that grass-lunger may say, pick me up and help me out, don’t just stand there and stare! So what if we looked a little closer with gentle eyes. What would we see? What would he need? Would we take the time to provide him rest from those heavy burdens?

Don’t we all get a bit nervous about stepping in to help? We question our motives, we worry about the person’s response, we wonder if we are doing any good at all. Sometimes, we just end up walking away because we have rationalized that the grass-lunger will get there eventually. But, all the while, the grass-lunger is just getting more and more tired and frustrated. And, if you’ve been in the position of that determined little grass hopper you know that you really just wish someone could unload some of burden. Can’t you just stop and be gentle with me, the grass-hopper might say.

I wish we could sometimes all just take a lesson from our dogs. They don’t hesitate. They don’t question if you need them or not. They don’t worry about how you will respond, if they will be laughed at or ignored. They just jump all over you anyway. They have one singular goal...to make your life better. Our animals know instinctively how to pick us up when our burdens are heavy. How to be gentle when we need someone just to sit quietly by our side. They know something special about gentleness and love.

Today is not only about blessing these special animals in our lives. It’s about learning from them and taking a lesson from their playbook. To stop and look. To be gentle and kind. To help where help is needed, without hesitation. And above all, to be willing to make a difference for someone.

*“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”*