

Co-Conspirators

As we finally receive some wonderful weather my mind turns to the beauty of God's creation. In this Sunday's scripture we will continue to hear about abiding in God and I believe that how we abide in God's creation is a part of how we "swim in God" as I invited in last Sunday's sermon.

I know my earliest memory of feeling utterly beloved of God came to me at 5 years old as I was sitting in a bed of clover in my back yard with my dog Pug. Pug was a German Shepherd-Basset Hound mix that joined my family only one year after I did, so for me his solid, vigilant presence was a happy fact of my little world.

My relationship with him preceded my conscious memory of the world around me so for me he had simply always been. His presence in my life was an outward and visible sign of goodness, unselfishness and outright steadfastness; his presence validated the belief that God and creation were intrinsically good.

But back then, of course, my experience in that bed of clover was not articulated that way; my feeling was independent of thought and reflection, it was simply lived knowledge.

Here were the parts of the equation: sunshine, clover, my dog Pug and a little song I had learned at Vacation Bible School..."Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, we are weak, but he is strong."

It wasn't until many, many years later when I was asked if I remembered first feeling loved by God that this experience became a conscious memory.

Without much prompting it crystalized fully in my mind's eye like a wonderful surprise. It immediately brought the sensation of joy---like finding a twenty-dollar bill in the pocket of your coat that you had long forgotten---this memory was like finding a treasure that had been hidden in plain sight.

Suffice it to say that I have always found God most present to me in nature. When I remember those points in my life that have been the most challenging and difficult, those times in my life when I felt people or institutions had hurt me and that God was not in them, I could spend time with my animals or out in nature and my sense that the universe God created was good would be restored.

As I moved into priesthood, I began to look much more closely at the humans in this world and found that indeed, sometimes it was possible to see in them the very image of God that we often forget is our core identity.

This is why I am so thankful for those like Francis of Assisi. The image of God was quite visible in Francis. He had the ability to see and treat the natural world in the same way we are meant to see and treat God and other people; that is, as something that is good in themselves---as opposed to seeing God, people or nature as objects, simply as something that can provide us with something we need or want.

Francis' way was to commune with all things, reverencing them and respecting their differences and distinctions. He let things *be* what they were *as* they were as opposed to how he could change them or make them into a commodity.

Theologian Sally McFague, whose work also inspires me, says that Francis' viewpoint is shocking to contemporary Christians. She points out that we have become accustomed to objectifying both people and the natural world as simply resources to be used. But Francis saw animals, trees, wildflowers, and people as an end or a good in and of themselves, not something to be exploited. For Francis, our ability to love our neighbor as ourselves was closely linked to how we respected all of God's creation.

The truth is that we live in a world that sees both nature and people as commodities to be used and exploited solely for our benefit. Even if we reject this worldview, we are part of the machine that enables it.

In a commoditized world everything is objectified. As Professor McFague points out, the common use of the expressions "natural resources" and "human resources" reveals one of the great spiritual challenges

of our time. How do we begin to fully see God in our neighbor or nature when we are co-opted by a worldview where all that really matters is the bottom-line.

I believe that it is important that we give thanks for the creatures that share our homes and lives and for those who feed our bodies; that we acknowledge that each one of them, just like us, is a witness to God's creative genius.

As novelist Alice Walker says, "we are one lesson." As we treat animals so we also treat people.

Profound connections exist between oppressing other people and oppressing nature. She says people and animals are all co-conspirator's, those who literally breathe together: we are one community breathing in and breathing out.

If we can come to understand that God created the entire world for community and not just the most privileged among human species for community, then we can begin to comprehend Francis' spiritual genius.

God created a brilliant and beautiful eco-system, one in which the health and welfare of one species is vastly interdependent on every other thing in that system. As McFague says: This interrelationship is so thorough, so profound that we usually do not see it.

We are all, literally, bone of the bone, flesh of the flesh of nature. We come from it and we return to it and every waking moment is dependent on the air we breathe, the water we drink, and every food substance that we eat.

Francis taught that nature is not "just" nature. He tells us that as one sees the face of Christ in the needy brother or sister, that nature, in its own very distinctive way, is a vision of God.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+