

## ALL IS KIN

*Feast of St. Francis*

*October 3, 2021 — Richard L. Ullman*

Here we are again: St. Francis Day. Seems to me, it's been growing in popularity of late. Perhaps because Francis is nearly everyone's favorite saint. He seems really easy to know. You can find him in many a garden. You know, right over there by the bird bath.

He also seems a relaxed sort of fellow—so relaxed that in his name we bring our favorite animals to church for a blessing, as it were, in the spirit of Francis. Imagine! Cats and dogs in church! That was absolutely unimaginable back in the day of my childhood at Red Clay Creek Presbyterian Church. The first time I presided at such a service, one fellow brought his muskrat. One girl showed up with her pet snake slithering over her shoulders. I think somebody else arrived with a caged bird, and there may also have a gerbil or hamster. Talk about relaxed! It was all so refreshingly different...

There are several well-known Francis stories. Like when he stood in the town square and, stripping off his clothes, renounced the ample privileges of his relatively high birth. Naked in the market square. That's a long way from a garden bird bath, a long way from relaxed time with kitties, puppies, and hamsters.

# # #

A less celebrated Francis story is an even further distance away. The year is 1219. The Fifth Crusade is underway, aggressive Christian warfare against Muslims in the East. Francis travels with the Crusader army, arriving in Egypt during the siege of Damietta, port city on the Nile Delta. There he witnesses enormous carnage, gruesome violence. He appeals to Cardinal Pelagius, the Crusade commander, who grants the monk permission to cross battle lines to pursue peace. His intention: meet the enemy commander, Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, and bring peace by converting his enemy to Christ.

Francis spends four days with the Sultan and his court. There is no conversion. Instead, there dawns surprising, growing, mutual respect. Al-Kamil offers peace terms. Crusade commander Pelagius rejects the overture. The war wears on. Eventually the Crusader army is surrounded and starving. Rather than annihilating the defeated army—as was his right under the ways of warfare in that day—rather than annihilating the army of his enemy, al-Kamil distributes bread for the starving soldiers and fodder for their famished horses, and provides the means for their safe return to Europe.

Francis is profoundly changed by his encounter with the Sultan. Upon his return to Assisi, he revises the Rule of his community, The Friars Minor. The Rule had declared that conversion to Christ was the goal of any encounter with Muslims. Recall, conversion to Christ was the key to Francis's peace plan. Now, after his parlay with al-Kamil, Francis changes the Rule. Friars are now permitted simply to live peaceably among Muslims and under Muslim rule, without trying to convert them. No small change in the era of the Crusades!

During those four days behind enemy lines, Francis had watched the Sultan and the Sultan's court at daily prayer, invoking the holy names of God:

Allah, the One, the All-Compassionate, the All-Merciful,  
the Creator, the Sustainer, the Gracious, the Forgiving...

Back at home in Assisi, Francis now composes his remarkable "Prayer of the Praises of God". It echoes Islamic prayer, beginning...

You are holy, Lord, the only God, You do wonders.  
You are strong, You are great, You are the most high,  
You are the almighty King.  
You, Holy Father, the King of heaven and earth.  
You are Three and One, Lord God of gods;  
You are good, all good, the highest good, ...

# # #

What moves me in this Francis story is how he responded to the dehumanizing, violent forces of his day. For all we have been experiencing these weary months of COVID-19 and before—terrorism, warfare, disease and death; violence throughout the land in our streets, at random synagogues, churches, school and shopping malls, and even on Capitol Hill—all that pales in comparison to the dehumanizing violence of Francis's day. Far from hiding in retreat from it, Francis advances, advances so far as to cross the battle lines—something rarely done. And once across, he meets the enemy face-to-face, intending peace—something rarer still. Finally, most rare of all, in that meeting Francis watches and listens. Francis watches and listens so intently that he sees God at work in The Other he dared cross over to meet.

In this I see a fulfillment—living out one of the most famous sayings of St. Francis: "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." No words are reported from the four days Francis and the Sultan spent with one another. Yet the deeds of each that followed preached gospel—Good News.

# # #

Brother Sun. Sister Moon. Mother Earth. Sister Death. Francis put those words of kinship in his Canticle of Creation with which we opened this morning's worship. All of God's good and gracious creation is our kin. All of God's creation is kin—our sister, our brother.

Rejoice today, if you choose, in birdbath, kittens and puppies, even hamsters and hedgehogs. But in your rejoicing, do not neglect the very much greater gospel fact:

*All of God's creation is kin.*

All, even and most especially when enrolled in violence. Yes, even our enemy is kin. In mutual honoring of that kinship is found the hope of peace. Would we but cross the battle line, watch and listen. Would all but watch and listen.

In all the holy Names of God.  
Amen.