

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year C, St Francis Day, 10am and 5pm
October 2, 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There was a moment in the lives of my parents when they recognized that their daughter was not created to play certain, particular sports. Mostly the sports and activities which included any running; throwing; hitting; or catching. After discovering that I spent an entire soccer season searching for four leaf clovers on the field and creating daisy chains while I was supposed to be tending goal, they wisely read the signs and shifted course.

A short while later, I found myself dropped off unceremoniously at a sailing day camp one summer, and while I didn't love the consistently ice cold water of Cape Ann, I did like that there was a rhyme and reason to the sport—and that not everything was about being physical. We had to learn about the wind, how it pushed and pulled the boat and sail to make it move-- and we also spent time on knots.

We spent part of every class learning about knots—trying them out, messing them up, tying each other up, making lassos, trying to follow 'seamanship' manuals clearly from the 1950s (this was a public program). As a beginner, I figured that this was a way for counselors to burn up time with a rambunctious group of elementary and middle schoolers, especially if there was foul weather that day.

We learned all the classic knots—bowline, eightknot, squareknot, hitches, shanks, cleats— if you have been a scout or similar, you may have memories of these knots too.

When I actually began to sail in a sixteen foot boat out on the ocean, it dawned on me that the knots we spent ages learning weren't about making a boat look shipshape and tidy, although for safety reasons, that too was important—they were all about being flexible in the face of the unknown. On the ocean, and away from harbor or dock, when something happened, it was up to you to use your mind and experience to figure out how to address it then and there.

And that led me to learn this curious knot called the sheet bend.

The sheet bend consists of two lines, or ropes, of unequal thickness. When two lines are of unequal diameters, and you tie them in a knot, such as a square knot, also known as a joining knot, they slip apart—the knot won't be reliable. When you need to use a sheet bend, it's most often because you have to solve a problem quickly on the water—when you can't find a line 'which matches', or something breaks and you need to sort out a safe hack to ensure you can still sail.

The sheet bend is an adaptive knot. Two different lines, through the mystery of physics and ingenuity, are given equal force and power so that they may remain connected.

So what the heck does this have to do with St Francis and cute puppies and pets and horses and the sun and oh my nature.

St Francis was born into a wealthy family, but let go of his inherited wealth and formed a community dedicated to simplicity, poverty and honoring creation. He is known for his hymn to Brother Sun, and Sister Moon, and every time we see a statue of him, he's holding some birds, including in our garden in the back of the church. He seems like a hippie-ish radical, gently persistent enough to get his message of honoring God's creation through to a post-modern world, and our normally reserved church goes wild with loving on pets and animals in his honor (a feast day I greatly appreciate!).

In Francis' day, humans were considered to be the rulers, even owners, of all creation; animals were seen as a lower species, and meant to be dominated (as others were, such as lower classes of humans, and humans who were not ethnically European, humans who were not Christian). But Francis kept insisting that the presence of God wasn't only in a church, or in priests, or in those who had a lot of money or power. And that was very uncomfortable to those people who benefitted from that status—who wanted all of God's creation ordered neatly into who was best, and who was worst—the church and state at that time was deeply reliant on hierarchy and division.

And Francis turned that all upside down.

St. Francis' gift to us was not in telling us to love animals—it was to honor the many facets of God's creation as equal, valuable and worthy. Francis reminded us in his actions and words that while God's creation took on different forms, that we were nonetheless tied and connected to one another, and dependent on one another—he preached the radical notion that nature itself was a reflection of God, and that humans were not rulers of creation, that the gifts of the land and sea were not ours to dominate.

Francis famously preached, “If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men.”

Francis was a sheet bend knot, friends. He took two parts of creation, with unequal power and strength, and allowed them to hold to one another equally when connected in just the right way. The people to the creatures. The creatures to the land. The land to the people. And in that equalization, the powers that held sway over keeping one group ruling over the other were diminished, and their facades of superiority and privatized blessed-ness torn down.

There is a reason that we love on our animals and pets this day. They humble us. They allow us to intuit and express love in ways which we do not, and cannot, express with other humans. We change our ways of living to include them, care for them, adapt our lives to their needs.

The sheet bend knot doesn't diminish the power of either line being used: both have value, regardless of their width or material. The knot itself honors each of the lines, and finds a way that both are both useful and valuable, and allows the user to adapt quickly to whatever challenges await.

There is a story of Francis and the wolf of Gubbio. For ages, a terrifying wolf had held the village of Gubbio in fear— threatening livestock and human lives. Francis walked into the nearby hills, and asked to speak to the wolf, who assented. Francis discovered that the wolf did 'evil out of hunger'. Bringing the wolf back into town amidst startled crowds, the town and wolf made a pact that they would feed the wolf from that day forward, releasing him from his hunger.

Francis took two creatures—the wolf and the townspeople—and brought them together. The people understood that the hungry needed to be fed. The wolf discovered that the people weren't the enemy, hunger was. Two different ropes, finding strength and resilience when connected.

This day is a blessing to us friends. Not just with our animals. Not just with the weather and creation or trees and ocean. It brings us back to the Gospel of Jesus that our work here is about relationship beyond traditional divisions. Beyond our family, beyond our neighbors, beyond those who look and act and eat and speak like 'we' do. It allows us to be curious about how we are yoked together and work for a common good, rather than compete for power and dominance, the temptation of which can be found in every part of our lives.

Great thanks for the gift of Francis of Assisi this day. Great thanks for the gift of the sheet bend. Great thanks to God for the surprising connections which lie before and around us, and great thanks for the eyes and hearts to see them.

Amen.