

Falling Into the Circle of Love
St. Clare and St. Francis Sunday, October 2, 2022, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

God cares for the grass of the field... and the sparrow that falls unnoticed by the wayside. She also holds the stars in their appointed places, leaves her mark in every living thing. And She cares for me! To be assured of this becomes the answer to the threat of violence—yea, to violence itself.” Howard Thurman (gender language modified)

Good morning all you furry, feathery, and scaly darlings! We love having you and your humans with us today! Throughout my childhood, one of our family friends was a veterinarian. She took care of all kinds of animals in that rural area, from dogs and cats to cows and horses, even baby skunks and raccoons who had been orphaned. She had an uncanny way of understanding and respecting the consciousness of these creatures and she was rarely bitten, scratched, or kicked. We loved to hear her tell stories about the amazing creatures she cared for. One story was about a raccoon orphaned at just 3 weeks, that she and her husband had raised to adulthood. Although she always attempted to reintroduce fostered animals to the wild, this baby raccoon had been adopted too early to make that transition. They eventually built a dog house for him, and prepared an egg each morning for his breakfast. The vet said they could always tell what the temperature was in the morning by how the raccoon received his egg. If it was over 50 degrees, he scampered up to the house and waited at the door. Under 50 degrees—he stayed inside the doghouse except for his arm, outstretched to his human parents who would hand the daily egg to him in the coziness of his home. (Hilarious!)

Or our dog, now passed, who would wag her tail after my nap, at the moment I began think about taking her for a walk, before I had even opened my eyes. There she was nudging my side with her wet nose, wagging to beat the band. If I wasn't thinking about walking her, she did not wag her tail, but kept on resting herself. How did she know?

Animals are amazing! One of the astonishing things about them is their homing capacity. Baby green turtles that have hatched on the beaches in the middle of the Atlantic, find their way across the ocean to their ancestral feeding grounds off the Brazilian coast. Years later, when the time comes for them to lay their eggs, they make their way back to the island of their birth, an island only 6 miles across and more than 1,400 miles away from Brazil—with no land in between.

Even more amazing is the instinctive ability of young birds to fly home to their ancestral winter quarters without being guided by older birds that have done it before. European cuckoos, raised by birds of other species, do not know their parents, who by the way, leave for southern Africa in July or August before the new generation is ready to go. About four weeks after the adults leave, the young cuckoos find their own way to their ancestral feeding grounds in Africa, unaided and unaccompanied.

Have you ever wondered how birds can shift course or swirl in a pattern and never run into each other? Or schools of fish? The responses of these creatures to change course is faster than their senses can apprehend. Unlike drivers on our freeways, they never crash! All these occurrences display some kind of resonance that is still a mystery.

People can form the closest of bonds with domesticated animals, who also show empathy toward us. They love us and like to be loved by us. Loving unconditionally seems to come more easily to dogs and cats than it sometimes does to human beings. We have guide dogs, and therapy animals, animals that visit in prisons and hospitals. I know that we have all experienced or known someone who has felt the comfort and healing of animals. Even Sigmund Freud was assisted by his dog, who lay at the foot of his couch and provided the “petting cure,” as he called it. As one youth minister said to our family as she blessed our dog, “May you always be the face of Jesus in this family.” I’ll spare you the details, but we sometimes laughed at where that face of Jesus had been!

In 2012, the New England Journal of Medicine presented an article on the achievements of Oscar the Cat. Oscar was adopted as a kitten by staff members in a medical center. Although sometimes aloof, he had an uncanny ability to know when residents were nearing death. Oscar would come to the bedside or onto the bed of a patient in final transition, and stay there until they had passed. At the time of the article, Oscar had presided over the deaths of more than twenty-five residents. So reliable was his presence that it was viewed by physicians and nursing staff as an almost absolute indicator of impending death. It allowed staff members to adequately notify families so that they too, could be present at the side of their loved one.

The visible world is an active doorway to the invisible world. That tree, that blade of grass, that dog or cat or even a ferret, reveal the breathtaking diversity and beauty of God. In wonder and mystery, God is in all things but contained by no thing. Creation is one giant symphony of mutual sympathy. All resonate to the heartbeat of God. The unity of spirit and matter is the mystery of incarnation, the Christ that what we celebrate at this table every week, in the bread and wine made holy.

Today we also celebrate St. Francis and St. Clare, two dropouts who spurned the agendas of the thirteenth century regarding success, war, and the economy. We know more about Francis than Clare—not surprisingly— but I assume both had been traumatized by a rubric of dominance in which one group was privileged over everyone else. Life in their time was framed as a competition for scarce resources, with clear winners and losers. Violence was justified, wanton, to protect and hang on to what you had.

In the midst of this toxic culture, Clare and Francis came to know and trust that God was eternal outpouring love, and that outpouring love is the inherent shape of all that exists. It was a concept as new as it was ancient and eternal. They saw in the visible world a gateway to the much larger invisible world of the Spirit. They recognized that the Christ mystery—inspired matter—was plan A for God, and not a mop-up exercise after Adam and Eve ate the apple! God's first idea was to pour out divine love into finite and visible forms. This is not the sterile universe of materialism, nor the gnostic devaluing of embodiment. It was a union, a material universe enchanted by God's Spirit

Francis and Clare also knew that God's love is both universal and particular—for one person, in this one place, this one time-bound and time ravaged person. Clare wrote: "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Through contemplation, place your heart in God so that you may feel what friends feel and taste the sweetness of God for you." God mirrors for us the beauty and divinity that God has created in us just as we are. We are loved in a particular and incomparable way, like lovers. God loves us like no other because there is no other like us. We are each God's favorite because we are each unique beings— and because God has no limits on love.

And God loves everyone and every living thing in the same generous way that God loves us. It's a lot for us to imagine. God's love keeps opening and opening to us forever. Nothing increases or decreases God's eagerness to love us. Clare and Francis trusted that love and allowed themselves to fall into that circle of joy whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is infinite. They were committed to the common greatness of the whole communion of creation. Their's was the wisdom of God.

It has been observed that in the 13th century, just as clocks were being placed in public places like church towers to count time, Francis stopped counting. He laid down the burdens of perfectionism, moved away from the economy of merit to the scary and wondrous economy of grace, where God does not do any counting, but only gives. God doesn't mind messy—She

created it and loves it and brings out of it endless variations of life and meaning. We are the ones who are disturbed by the mess. In their spiritual journeys, Clare and Francis came to know that life is never about being correct but always and only about being connected. At the end of her life, Clare wrote with utter confidence, that she was infinitely loved by Infinite Love.

This is good news for us today. We all carry burdens and injuries. We sustain losses, not only of people dear to us, but of the beloved pets who are part of our families. We carry burdens of loneliness, and the should haves or should have beens. We mourn relationships that are broken or strained. We experience resentments and bewilderment at actions and words that injure us or others. Countless things distract us—there is too much to tend to with too little time.

We can become lost in a culture that confuses strength with independence from others, and acceptance of vulnerability with weakness. We lose our whole stories—for example, the truth that we were a nation established by traumatized “settlers” who were trying to escape the brutality of religious intolerance and gross intractable economic disparity. Where is the recognition of the cost of fleeing home never to return? Unrecognized, that trauma, plus the violence that made it intolerable to remain home, was not integrated and surpassed, but instead perpetuated and passed on to others.

American idolizing of independence, and a conception of freedom loosed from the common good is an unholy and unhealthy defense against our true interdependence. It weighs us down. Perhaps it is what Jesus was referring to when he spoke to the religious leaders of his day. “You think that you’ve secured yourself by the division of the pure from impure, and by exclusion of others from God’s circle of love, but you are way out to sea. You are blind to love and the sacredness of God’s presence in everyone and everything. God’s presence is everywhere, and it is to that presence that we are to bow, especially in those you consider unworthy or different than you.

Jesus comes to us in the gospel reading today with good news. Christ in Jesus, who loved us by becoming one of us, knew that we cannot not be yoked. We can be way off the mark in what we trust, and we are vulnerable and dependent on love to live and thrive. Bob Dylan sang, you gotta serve somebody. I would say you gotta walk with somebody. We are created to need and depend on the love of God and each other. God loves vulnerability—ours and God’s. As Francis and Clare knew, falling into God’s loving presence changes everything.

Jesus called Clare and Francis, and calls us today. “Come to me, all who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest for your souls. Be with me as I am with God’s outpouring love. I

am as kind and gentle as my parent who knows me completely as I know her. Never coercive and violent, I am humble and patient. I long to walk with you, yoked in love and solidarity. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace, and keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly, like Clare and Francis."

Science calls it the "big bang." Our theological name, for love exploding itself out in all directions is Christ. Our entire universe is connection and relationship from the smallest atom to the galaxies. Our beloved animals remind us of that truth, and like them, we have built into us the holy longing to return home to love. Theologian and mystic Howard Thurman wrote, "There must be always remaining in every life, some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathless and beautiful."

There is an inherent resonance in the world around us and within us if we can only hear the song and see the beauty. Matter is and always has been the hiding place for Spirit, forever offering herself to be discovered anew. In our wonder at the mysteries of a Spirit infused universe, may we fall into that circle of joy whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is infinite. This is the glory of God.

Amen