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St. Francis of Assisi

As some of you know, Beverley and I have a little cabin in Mt. Shasta that sits on a few acres. We spent almost a week there at the end of the summer and discovered that for the second year in a row, we have a bear problem. The "problem" with the bear is now is the time he – we'll call him a he as we've never seen any cubs – is laying on the calories for the winter and our fruit trees are on his dinner route.

Last year he almost ruined one of our youngest and most productive apple trees by breaking down several major branches climbing up to get the fruit. When we arrived this September, he'd already damaged three more trees. And these trees, needless to say, are important to us. But of more concern than that is the fact that once your place gets on a bear's dinner route, they get bolder and bolder until sometimes, they even break into your house, which concerned us, since we're not there much.

That's when we decided to contact a wildlife removal specialist, who showed us photos of several bears he'd trapped, not to mention a few mountain lions. This guy knows what he's doing, and he was willing to drive up from Red Bluff and trap the bear if we'd pay for his gasoline. He did say though, that in California, he has to turn over all bears he traps to the Fish and Game Commission, who do not just take them out to some remote area and turn them loose; they kill them. California did you know... has the second largest bear population of any state in the Union, next to Alaska.

Well, we weren't delighted about that last part but we were relieved to know that he could get rid of our bear problem. It's the responsibility of the property owner to contact Fish and Game and ask them to grant permission for a depredation permit. Which I did, and after a long conversation in which the State's wildlife biologist discovered that no, we don't keep garbage around the house, or have bird or hummingbird feeders – the bear destroyed those last year – or any other attractants save for the fruit trees, he finally said he would grant us a permit.

I wish I could tell you that that's when we looked at each other and said, "WWSFD?... What would St. Francis do?" It would make a much better story if I could tell you that. What we did say was, "What will John and Peggy think?" And... "Do we really want to sign the execution order for this bear?" Now, John and Peggy are our across the creek neighbors who just happened to be on vacation when we were at the cabin last September. They are retired forester, not particularly religious, may or may not have heard of St. Francis, but certainly live in the spirit of St. Francis, which is to say, they live very simply and with a profound reverence for the earth and all living creatures, whether flora or fauna.

I called the bear trapper back and confessed that we were having second thoughts. He said we might try cayenne pepper. Bears apparently hate cayenne pepper. The wildlife biologist had mentioned ammonia, so to make a long story short, I walked into town and bought one store out of cayenne pepper, also some ammonia, came back and spent the afternoon dusting the trees with cayenne and filling balloons with ammonia then slathering them with peanut butter. Between the two, with the help of some folks we know up there who've been kind enough to go by once a week and re-dust the trees, we may just have gotten off the bear's dinner route.

But you see, we came just this close to having that bear killed. The way we were thinking there for a couple of days was: human interests – specifically, our interests – are more important than any other interests. A few apples are more important than a bear's life. That thinking is pervasive, and part of the reason for it is a misinterpretation of the Creation Story in the Book of Genesis, where God tells Adam and Eve – as one translation puts it – to have dominion over everything that lives on the planet. A better interpretation of the passage tells us that we are to be good stewards over everything that lives on the planet. But let's face it, for many of us, maybe even for most of us, when it comes to nature and air and water and all the other resources God has so richly bestowed upon us, what we really believe – at least if we stop to examine our behavior more than two minutes, is it's really all about us. We're the most important creatures and we should be able to do what we want with all this bounty, especially, by God, if it's on our own land.

Francis of Assisi behaved differently. It's easy to get overly sentimental about Francis, especially when we only associate him with backyard birdbaths and animal blessings. And sure, it's fun to bless animals on his feast day, but we do so out of respect for his life of utter simplicity and his radical reverence for all of God's creation. For Francis, the natural world was not a convenience for us to use and objectify, but a fellow subject, a living entity that he reverently addressed as "Sister" and "Brother."

In case you're a little hazy on his biography, Francis was born in 1182, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. His early years were frivolous, but an experience of sickness and another of military service were instrumental in leading him to reflect on the purpose of life. One day, in the church of San Damiano, he seemed to hear Christ saying to him, "Francis, repair my falling house."

He took the words literally, and sold a bale of silk from his father's warehouse to pay for repairs to the church of San Damiano. His father was outraged, and there was a public confrontation at which his father disinherited and disowned him, and he in turn renounced his father's wealth--one account says that he not only handed his father his purse, but also took off his expensive clothes, laid them at his father's feet, and walked away naked. He declared himself "wedded to Lady Poverty", renounced all material possessions, and devoted himself to serving the poor.

Since he could not pay for repairs to the Church of San Damiano, he undertook to repair it by his own labors. He moved in with the priest, and begged stones lying useless in fields, shaping them for use in repairing the church. He got his meals, not by asking for money so that he might live at the expense of others, but by scrounging crusts and discarded vegetables from trash-bins – You could say he was one of the first dumpster divers. He also worked as a day laborer, insisting on being paid in bread, milk, eggs, or vegetables rather than in money. Soon a few companions joined him.

It wasn't long before the Order of Friars, Minor – as the Franciscans are officially known – was suffering from its own success. Then, as now, many persons were deeply attracted by Francis and his air of joy, abandonment, and freedom. What is overlooked is that the joy, the abandonment and the freedom were made possible only by his willingness to accept total poverty, not picturesque poverty but real dirt, rags, cold, and hunger, and lepers with real sores and a real danger of infection. Many idealistic young men were joining the Order in a burst of enthusiasm and then finding themselves not so sure that such extremes of poverty were really necessary...

Apparently Francis was just as much of an anomaly in the thirteenth century as he would be today. His vision for living simply and communally, and in close contact with the earth is frequently admired but seldom emulated. In fact, we Christians have given little moral leadership to any alternative vision other than the prevailing consumerist one, a far cry from Francis' daring and clear commitment to nature, simplicity, and non-violence.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says, "If the nations that built on the Judeo-Christian heritage do not soon see the work of earth care and climate change as a moral and spiritual imperative, one wonders how we will have any moral authority left?" As one of the songs we sometimes sing in worship says, "The earth does not belong to us but we belong to earth."

One of the guiding principles that grows out of a little knowledge of the life of St. Francis is this: "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better." Francis did not concentrate on attacking evil in others, but rather, just spent his life falling... shedding... turning loose... embracing sister poverty. And he fell all the way into the good, the true, and the beautiful. It was the only way he knew how to fall into God.

It's paradoxical... it's counter-cultural... it's why he's recognized as a saint. We're told every day and in every way that the more we acquire... the more we have, the happier we'll become. Yet, Francis found that as he got older, as he got poorer, it took less and less to make him happy.

Such inner brightness ends up being a much better and longer-lasting alternative to evil than any protest, any anger, any violence, any war, or any ideology could ever be. All

you have to do is meet one such shining person and you know that he or she is the goal of humanity and the delight of God. (I hope you are becoming that shining person yourself.)

Special thanks to Fr. Richard Rohr for the last two paragraphs of this sermon, which appear in his book, *Falling Upward*; Jossey-Bass Press, 2011.