
St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Feast of St. Francis – Year B**

As you may have guessed from the hymns we're singing, and the animals worshipping with us, it's St. Francis Sunday! And we love St. Francis here! We even have a St. Francis Chapel, on your right as you leave the nave, with a St. Francis statue and stained-glass window.

In that window, you read words from a prayer attributed to him, "*Lord, make us channels of your peace.*" And you see the saint himself standing in his simple brown robe, his left hand reaching up to welcome or release a bright red bird, and his right hand reaching down to touch the head of a furry gray four-legged creature. You might think it's a dog, from the way it looks up at him so adoringly. But it's not. It's a wolf, from a famous story about St. Francis. [\[1\]](#)



The story goes like this: There was a wolf terrorizing the small town of Gubbio, where Francis was staying. It had eaten some livestock and even some people. The villagers were scared, naturally, and went about armed, and didn't dare leave the city walls. Francis had compassion on them and wanted peace, which meant going out to the wolf. Everyone warned him it was too dangerous, and downright impossible. But Francis had hope in Christ and in the possibility of peace. So off he went to meet the wolf... *unarmed*.

When he entered the woods, the beast came charging at him, its mouth open and teeth bared. Francis stood firm and still, and made the sign of the cross over the wolf, or himself. The wolf slowed, Francis called gently, "*Come to me, Brother Wolf,*" and commanded it, in the name of Christ, not to hurt anyone.

The wolf came and lay at Francis' feet. And Francis spoke to it again: "*Brother Wolf, you have done great harm,*

and deserve great punishment, even death. But I want to make peace between you and this people, so that you don't harm them anymore, and they don't harm you." The wolf assented with a swish of its tail and a bow of its head, as if that's what it had wanted all along.

Francis had compassion on the wolf, too. Recognizing the fierce hunger behind its attacks, he promised that the people would feed it. Of course, after all the harm done, they would need convincing; the wolf would have to earn their trust. When Francis asked the wolf for a pledge, the wolf placed its paw in the saint's hand.

Then, Francis led the wolf back to town, and he stood between it and the villagers it had hurt. Before they could react, he preached to them about fear and repentance. It was a way of reminding them of who they really were—of the goodness in them, which persisted even in terror and conflict. Then, he told them about Brother Wolf's promise, and asked them to make promise, too: to give the wolf food. It was a big ask, given their history! So the wolf repeated the pledge, kneeling and placing its paw in Francis' hand.

The wolf stayed in Gubbio; the villagers fed it every day; and it gave them protection and companionship. When the wolf died two years later, they grieved, because the wolf had become their brother, and a symbol for them of peace and kindness.

That's the end of the story of the wolf of Gubbio, but we've known other wolves, haven't we? Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? Well, everyone! The wolf is a primal, archetypal image that evokes our various fears, dangers, enemies. Forces beyond our control. Seemingly intractable problems or conflicts. Seemingly endless cycles of violence, misunderstanding, hostility that we can't see our way out of. What does the image hold for *you*? What does your wolf look like?

Whatever the wolf represents, Francis, following Jesus, answered it with compassion and gentleness and truth. This may seem naive or counterintuitive. Brave and selfless things often do. And it *was* brave and selfless of Francis to face this big bad wolf, unarmed; to stand between it and the villagers; to speak the truth to both; and to honor the needs and hurts—and appeal to the goodness—of both of them.

Indeed, this is one of Francis' great spiritual gifts: his ability, or willingness, to see the reflection of the divine in all people and all creation—or as a contemporary Franciscan says, to "reveal to the world its essentially good and holy face."^[ii] It is a sacred befriending, and it's connected to another Franciscan charism: seeing and trusting the essential unity that underlies all creation, and living out that sense of oneness with God, others, earth and all its creatures.

I don't know how Francis came to this charism; but I'm guessing that, along with the grace of God, his prayer life had something to do with it. Francis spent a lot of time in prayer. Some say that he spent the whole night in prayer before stepping into Gubbio's crisis. Which makes sense, if you think about it! How else could he have been so courageous, so still and firm and compassionate, with *both* the wolf and the people? Only by being grounded himself in the ground of all being, and all beings. Only by contemplating, receiving, God's love for all of his being. For his whole self. Including the wolves that raged inside.

That's right. Not all wolves are outside of us, are they? There are wolves inside, too: stormy feelings of anger, sadness, fear, shame; hungers we can't fill; grudges we can't let go of; memories we wish we didn't have; worries that keep us up at night. We take up arms and fight against them, which may only make them hungrier, more ferocious, and more frightening.

What would it be like to put down our arms and be calmly present to these wolves, too? To call them "brother" or "sister"? To look upon them, too, with compassion and gentleness? What if they, like the wolf of Gubbio, are just hungry, and lonely, and need to be tended to, and befriended?

That doesn't mean accepting the problems, hardships, injustices, or hurts behind them. It doesn't mean causing more harm by giving free rein to toxic energy or acting out negative emotions. On the contrary, in listening and tending to the wolves inside, we might find that they have something to say to us. We might find a new relationship to them. We might find the divine present and revealed in them.

And that helps us see the God's presence and love elsewhere, too—in all creation: wolves and lambs, sun, moon, stars, water, rich and poor, friend and foe, life and death. Yes, even death, Francis calls "sister."

This naming of life around us, and in us, as brother or sister, mother or father, friend—it is a wonderful spiritual practice. It opens our eyes and hearts to our mysterious kinship with all God's creation, and affects, in turn, how we relate to it. How we treat and honor it, and others.

Once we glimpse this holy kinship of all things and people in God, once we glimpse this eternal unity, we begin to see, and seek, it everywhere. And that, my friends, is the beginning of peace. Lord, make us servants of your peace!

[i] *Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, Chapter XXI.

[ii] Friar Murray Bodo, *The Threefold Way of St. Francis*, quoted in tamingthewolf.com/peace-episodes/episode-19-face-of-a-franciscan.

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