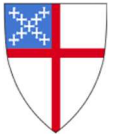




**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
and the Feast of St. Francis and Blessing of Pets**
Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner, Oct. 5, 2025



[Job 39:1–18](#) [Lamentations 1:1-6](#) [Psalm 137](#) [2 Timothy 1:1-14](#) [Luke 17:5-10](#)

Welcome, dear friends – and welcome, friendly beasties! We are blessed to come together on this beautiful fall day to celebrate creation. Our scriptures today seem an odd fit with the feast of St. Francis. We begin with a sad lament about a lonely empty city...an empty shell of what it once had been...what is it like to be emptied out?

Oddly, even as we celebrate the life of St. Francis and ask for God's blessing on our fellow companion creatures today, we also hear of the nation of the ancient Hebrew people being emptied out and made desolate as they were forced from their homes and marched away to Babylon and other cities of the growing Babylonian Empire. But, even as we sing that round based on the words from the book of Lamentations, "By the waters of Babylon, we lay down and wept," we are singing the lament of every people that has been forced from their homeland by a conquering tribe or empire. The same cry went up from the people forced to the shores of Ghana, marched to the seaports to be shipped and sold like cattle in Europe and here in America; from the people pressed in the Long March and the Trail of Tears hundreds of miles from their tribal homes, here in America; from the Vietnamese "boat people" and Sudanese "lost boys" who fled across seas of water and sand to find their way here to America; from the Jews across the German Nazi Empire, across much of Europe, herded into railcars and trucks to be forced into concentration camps; and now from the people in Gaza pressed from place to place by the bombs and threats of bombs of the nation of Israel. It is the heartfelt cry and sobbing prayer of any refugee, forced immigrant, or conquered people that has seen the desolation of the homeland. This is such sadness as very few of us has seen or experienced in our life in this country, where we have so far felt the quiet of security and peace, and distance from the worst of strife.

The world can be a hard place, terribly hard, terrifyingly hard, relentlessly hard. The sorrows and terrors can feel overwhelming. And our fears and feelings of helplessness can get the better of us.

In these kinds of times as we live now – and in many different times of our lives – we can easily feel like our faith is flagging, drooping, seeping away. So we cry out like the disciples as we heard them in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. We cry out like them, "Increase our faith!"

And Jesus responds, "You don't need much. You just need to act on the faith you have."

You remember how the letter of James says, "Faith without works is dead"? I think what James meant is just what Jesus was saying. It is not enough to have faith if you don't act on your faith. It is not enough to believe the most bizarre things and claim them as faith. Because true faith is linked to intention, motivation, purpose, and action. It is not enough to believe and sit back and wait for something to happen. But even a little faith can stir you enough to act, to speak, to move, to stand, to step forward – to put your faith forward, on the line.

Just a little faith can free us to forgive, again and again and again. Just a little faith can free us from slavish love of money, from slavery to lust, from temptations to lure others into stumbling.

Saints like Francis, and Clare, and Mother Theresa – they are not born in another world of ease and freedom from tragedy or trauma. All around the saints, across the ages, there has been war and famine, cruelty and systems of control, poverty and mean-spiritedness, injustice and blindness to suffering. Francis and Clare lived in a time when knighthood was lionized and battle was glorified, as small kingdoms across Europe fought each other in petty wars for the upper hand of control even while they also looked for some unity in their larger ongoing fight to keep Muslim armies at bay. In the burial chapel under the Basilica of St. Clare of Assisi, not far from Clare's tomb, there is a painting of St. Clare holding high in front of her a monstrance – a bright star-like cross with the Sacrament of Christ's Body – with her sisters behind her with arms extended in prayer over the walls of the city. Beneath her, outside the walls, the invading Muslim forces shrunk and collapsed before the light. This is one of the legends of St. Clare that gives us a glimpse of how important her presence was in a time of upheaval and turmoil in the world. It is quite a different picture than the other images of her in acts of healing and care for the poor. And it is quite a different story than the legend of St. Francis going to meet the Sultan from Morocco and sharing his faith in Christ. But in all these stories, some that we know happened and some that may have happened, we catch site of these remarkable saints 800 years ago who stepped forward, away from their prior lives and circles to devote themselves completely to Christ's mission of love.

Assisi is a small city on a hill – a walled and fortified city back in the 1200s and onward for several centuries. Today, one can visit the Papal Basilica and Sacred Convent of St. Francis of Assisi, begun in 1228. In the centuries following St. Francis' life, this convent grew and was filled with hundreds of Franciscan Friars Minor (a humble title chosen by Francis for the brothers of the order).



At the top of the expansive lawn (out of view) is a modern dark bronze statue of Francis the young soldier returning to Assisi on his horse, head hung low in embarrassment and uncertainty, disheartened as he reenters the city of his earlier carefree days as a wealthy youth and leaving behind his dream to become a knight famed for great battles. He has returned after a dream during an illness that told him to return to Assisi and that said, "Follow the Master rather than the man." From that moment, he embarked on a journey of laying down his old self, seeking direction in Christ's presence, and finding and following his heart in union with Christ's own heart. He dared to follow God's call and to give himself completely to it.

We heard today from II Timothy the verse that you see in my email signature: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." Cowardice is not the spiritual territory of the brothers and sisters of Christ Jesus. Neither is shame or embarrassment at following this Jesus.

We are followers of Jesus. Do not fear, do not hide. We are followers and brothers and sisters of "our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

At the Papal Basilica of St. Francis, Heather and I went with other visitors and pilgrims into the basilica and descended down into the undercroft. There, we entered the chapel where St. Francis is buried directly behind the altar. Surrounding him in insets in the walls around the altar are the tombs of five of his closest companions – his four closest early brothers in the order, Leo, Masseo, Angelo, and Rufino, and Friar Jacopa, a noblewoman and close friend and supporter.

Groups and individuals walked in slow steps around Francis' tomb, and often knelt in prayer, reaching through the protective grate to touch the marble of his tomb. They also stood or knelt by the tombs of his close comrades. Heather and I sat in the chapel area in prayer for a long time. Earlier in my life, I had read about Francis and his early companions. So I was drawn deeply into a sense of their presence and continuing dear companionship even now, even in death and beyond death, all these centuries later. I sat in their presence, breathed in their shared love for each other, for Jesus, and for all people they touched. And I wept those quiet tears of wonder and joy at the beauty of their life. Heather and I took our turns to walk around and kneel at the tomb of Francis, and we greeted his brother and sister friars surrounding him, thanking them for their lives and thanking God for their witness to the complete, simple, direct love of Jesus.

Just down the hill a bit, still within the city, was the Basilica of St. Clare. Clare was also a very close companion of Francis – twelve years younger, but as an older teen was completely drawn to what Francis and his brothers preached, taught, and lived as the heart of the Gospel. She left her noble family to join the friars, and entered a convent. Like Francis, she stayed steady in her resolve and resisted her family's attempts to retrieve her or force her to leave. The Claretian sisterhood grew under her leadership.



Heather and I entered the church. There we entered the side chapel that contains the same painted crucifix before which Francis knelt, from which Francis heard Christ speak to him, "Francis, rebuild my church, which is falling into ruin." Francis first took this quite literally and went out begging for stones and bricks to begin rebuilding broken-down churches. But he came to realize that Jesus was calling him to rebuild the heart, the spiritual life and health of the whole Church everywhere.

As we sat among others in prayer and meditation on the crucifix that spoke to Francis, I again was drawn into seeing Christ and listening for how Christ might speak to me. I heard no voice. But what gripped me deeply, and stayed with me through the rest of our travels – and returned to me as a prayer of my own – was how Jesus stands forward on this cross, even when surrounded on the sides by other figures. Even with others around him, friends or enemies or neutral onlookers, Jesus moves into the foreground, completely intent and at rest in what he was called to do, to offer himself. He has let all that is around him recede into the background – still there, but having no more tug

on his will. He has moved forward in a stance of bold calmness to give himself, regardless of any friendly or unfriendly force that tries to call him in another direction. It was as if the crucifix was calling to me, saying, "See how I stand forward. You can do this, too, David. Stand forward."

Stand forward. Let the many tugs and attachments around you recede. Don't let them hold you back from what I have called you to do. See how I stand forward to offer myself, freely.

Saints like these – like Francis, and Clare, and Mother Theresa – they learned how to stand forward. Just a bit of faith, but faith tied to action. Each one of them leaving behind any other bonds that kept them from following the bright, clear call of God stirring in each of their hearts and minds. The call carried Mother Theresa across wide seas to another land wracked with poverty, to live and serve among the poorest of the poor. The call carried Francis to embrace poverty and simplicity, to love without restriction or pretense.

Today, we bring our beloved companion creatures and ask for God's blessing on them. And we remember some of the stories of Francis and his love that extended to the animals and to the larger creatures of great power like the sun and moon, the winds, the seas, the seasons, fire, earth and stone, and death itself – even death. There are the stories of Francis preaching the good news of God's love to the birds, and of Francis confronting the wolf that was terrorizing the village of Gubbio, and in each story these creatures responding with understanding of what Francis told them. His great hymn, Canticle of the Sun, sings praise to brother sun and sister moon, and on from there through all levels of creation.



So as we bring our pets forward for God's blessing, let us also join with Francis in thanks and prayer for all creation, all creatures great and small – mountain goats and deer, wild asses and oxen, ostriches – algae and mushrooms and lichen – trees and tiny grasses – ants and bees.

And, more to the heart of it all, let us meditate and pray on this question. Let it haunt our days in the weeks to come. Let it take you, as it has taken me.

What would it mean if each of us heard this invitation of Jesus?

"See me. I stand forward to do what I am called to do.

You can do this, too."

How will you stand forward as God calls you, at this time in your life?