

Sermon: Donkey Hugs and the Embrace of St. Francis

St. Francis Sunday, October 5, 2025

Scripture: Job 39:1–18; Luke 12:13-21

Hello, I'm Joe. I'm your new rector.

And I come to you at time when there is a lot to pray for out there. The WORLD ... really needs a big hug right now.

SO ... with that in mind ... and since this is the Sunday when we celebrate **St. Francis** — the patron saint of animals — I want to share with you **how DONKEYS hug**.

I want to make sure you heard that right: Donkey hugs.

You see, my wife, Heidi, and I used to run the Trinity Retreat Center, just up the highway here in CT. And, as part of our ministry, we decided to start a **sanctuary** for **donkeys**.

Real donkeys. Rescued donkeys.

The donkeys that came to us were hurting.
Abused. Starved. Abandoned. Frightened. Mistrustful.

So here's what we did:
We fed them.
We brushed them.
We fixed up the old barn.
We gave them a safe place.
We let them know they were loved.

And THEN... miracle of miracles... *they began to love back*.

As *they* healed, they became a healing presence for others.

In fact, when you visit the sanctuary today ... a Trinity donkey will often walk right up to you. She'll come up and look at you with a steady, non-judgmental gaze. And then — she'll just rest her velvety muzzle on your shoulder. No judgment. No questions. No conditions. Just love. Just AN embrace.

These donkeys don't care how much money you make, the color of your skin, where you were born, how the world labels you, what you've done, or what you think you've done.

They just walk up to you and rest their head on your shoulder.

And that! Is how a donkey HUGS.
And THAT! Is also ... how our God loves.

God rests on our weary shoulders and whispers:
"I'm here. You are beloved. Always. No matter what."

In today's Old Testament reading, Job could definitely use a hug.

Job is one of the oldest books of the Bible.

It's ancient Hebrew poetry that wrestles with the human experience -- with suffering, with meaning.

"Why?" Job cries out.

"Why do **GOOD people** suffer?"

He wants quick, simple answers.

But what does God give him in today's text?

Not NEAT theology.

Not simple equations.

God gives... **wonder.**

God gives... **wildness.**

God gives... **creation.**

"Do you see the mountain goats give birth?

Who set the wild donkey free?

Do you know how the eagle soars?"

And Job is silenced — not by fear, but by awe.

Because he realizes that our living God is bigger than our questions.

God is Wilder than our doubts.

In today's passage, God speaks out of the whirlwind. And this is God's message to Job:

There is no way, in the complexity of the cosmos, to understand everything.

But Trust that you are part of something greater. Even when this crazy world doesn't make sense, know that you are loved.

Allow yourself to be embraced by the mystery.

It reminds of one of my favorite quotes from Jane Goodall, who passed away this week. Dr. Goodall said: "Faith, whatever you're being faithful about, can't really be scientifically explained."

"And I don't want to explain this whole life business THAT WAY. There's so much mystery. There's so much awe".

WITH THOSE WORDS IN MIND ... I think it's awesome that my very first Sunday with you is **St. Francis Sunday.**

Francis of Assisi saw the whole world as family.

He called the sun his brother.

The moon his sister.

The wolf his friend.

The leper his brother.

He embraced not only the *beautiful* but the broken.
Not only the tame but the wild.
He knew that grace finds beauty in ugly things.

And HERE, in this parish named for Francis —
I already see that same spirit alive.

I saw it last week, when our U-Haul truck finally rumbled up to the rectory.
Yes, We were three hours late.

It was almost dark.

But you were there.
Many of you were Waiting in the twilight.
With food. With laughter. With muscles.
With open hearts and open arms. Embracing us.

I see it in your ministries:
how you feed the hungry,
how you walk with immigrants in the shadow of fear,
how you bring music to the world,

how you build bridges with other faiths,
how you find the courage to stand for love in a world that seems to addicted to division and power.

And you know what? You don't just carry the name of Francis.
You LIVE Francis.
You embrace like Francis.

You are welcoming and live your faith with a dedication to inclusivity that is a sign of true abundance.

Jesus definitely reminds us today that “**One’s LIFE** ... does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Over at the rectory, as we continue to unpack and trip over mountains of boxes – looking around, asking, “How did we get so much STUFF!!” -- I feel Jesus’ words deeply!

Jesus is telling this parable of a farmer with overflowing barns. He’s decides that he needs to build even bigger barns to store his crops. This guy seems to have all together. He’s ready to eat, drink and be merry.

But then you take a closer look at how he talks: “My barns. My grain. My goods. My soul.”

And there it is: The **unholy trinity** of “me, myself, and I.”

He doesn’t mention the workers who helped him bring in the crops.
There’s no thanks to God.
No thought of the poor.
No prayer for wisdom.

And, of course ... that's the thing about being human: When things gets crazy, and its hard to make sense of this world, it's so easy for us to retreat inward.

We crave control. We cling to easy comfort. We hoard. Like Job, we want simple answers.

But Jesus turns all of that on its head.

This parable is not about wealth management; **it is about SOUL management.**

It reminds us that God's economy isn't transactional; God's economy is relational.

And the reality ... is that we can't do this thing CALLED LIFE alone.
Not even Jesus (God incarnate in fragile flesh) could do it alone — he called a big group friends to walk with him.

Life is not about making space for our stuff.
It is about making room IN OUR hearts.

Room for God.
Room for giving.
Room for friends and strangers.

I certainly couldn't imagine walking this road without Heidi.
She is my partner in ministry. She grounds me and supports me in so many ways.

AS THIS reading from Job reminds us ... so much of how we journey in this short life is a mystery.

And ... to be honest ... I'm still not entirely sure how we found each other. But I know this: I am so grateful that the Holy Spirit has brought us together.

I'm happy to just LET THE MYSTERY BE.

In fact, after more than a year in Atlanta – in “the tumult of the city,” in the words of today's psalmist ...

It's such a joy to once again hear the crickets' lullaby in the woods,
and to feel the cool breeze visit us through an open window at night.
It's absolutely heaven to wake to the bird songs.

I see it as creation's way of saying to me and Heidi:
You belong. You are home.

And now, with you —
we are home.

As your new rector, I want to end today by making a few promises for the YEARS ahead:

- First: I promise that **I will show up.** For me, “presence” is part of God’s dream. You can count on me to walk with you, arm-in-arm, heart, mind, and soul as we strive to serve Christ as children of the light in the Stamford area.
 - **Second: I will tell you the truth.** Even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard. I will tell you the truth.
 - **Finally, I promise that I will love you.** One-on-one, and as a parish.
I will never stop reminding you:
you are the beloved of God.
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So, beloved...
let yourself be embraced —
by God, by creation, by one another.

And then, together,
inspired by donkey hugs, by St. Francis, and by the grace of God,
let’s be a people who embrace —
with justice, with mercy, with joy, with music.

Not with bigger barns or walls,
but with bigger tables —
where everyone has a seat,
where wonder drives out fear,
and holy bread is shared in a feast of love.

Let’s Go! With our arms wide open —
Remembering that we are called St. Francis.

Because this world is hungry. And it needs a Big hug right now.

Amen.