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Francis of Assisi
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Sometimes life seems so complicated: problems to be solved, bills to pay, families to manage, meals to cook, work to be done, exercise to try to fit into schedule, situations to worry about, dogs to walk, and the list goes on and on.

Of course there are plenty of places to turn for help: on-line banking pays bills automatically; personal coaches and trainers help us exercise, parent or manage our vocations. And tips from cooking shows or magazines help us make quick, easy meals.

One of my favorite places to go for inspiration is the magazine REAL SIMPLE. I think people love this magazine because they truly want to simplify their lives. This month's headlines promise a "stress free plan for delicious weeknight meals; 21 smart, real-life laundry strategies; and how to save on groceries, winter coats and Halloween supplies."

Unfortunately, the suggestions I read don't always simplify my life. Instead, they make me feel guilty, reminding me that I *should* be simplifying. And the suggestions and clever ideas get added to my list of things to do. And I go about my day living in the same way that I always have before...

Jesus says, "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." God knows, and cares about, our complicated lives. These words remind us that our day-to-day living is closely tied to our spirituality. When we live consciously, we're more in tune to God, and to all creation. Author Duane Elgin, who is one of a growing number of people signing on to a movement called voluntary simplicity describes the movement this way, "Simple living is not about living in poverty or self-inflicted deprivation. Rather, it is about living an examined life—one in which you have determined what is important, or 'enough,' **for you**, discarding the rest. (It's about) living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich."

Today, we also honor St. Francis, who really could be the patron saint of simplicity—he would no doubt be a leader in today's voluntary simplicity movement. Like many people choosing a path of simplicity today, he realized his life was filled with things and tasks that brought him little pleasure. So he gave them up to focus on what was most important to him—serving God.

As a young boy, Francis had lived what many would call an enviable life. He was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant and it was assumed that he would one day take on the family business. As a young man Francis was a playboy, a partier and a warrior. But eventually he had dream in which he heard Christ calling him to repair his church. Francis began to help those who were in need, using his father's money to help the poor and the sick.

His father, furious at Francis' squandering money on churches and beggars, hauled him before the bishop to bring him to his senses. When the hearing began, Francis calmly took off all his clothes, gave them to his father (the astonished bishop quickly covered Francis with a cloak), and announced that he would from now on follow only his Father in heaven, not his father on earth. His life from this time on was lived without money and family ties.

Now I'm quite sure most of us won't *voluntarily* commit to a life of poverty, and I'm not advocating that we do. But I do think it's helpful to look at the saints for wisdom and understanding in our spiritual lives. The message is simple: we benefit from simplifying our lives to have more space for what really matters to us. Francis followed the example of Jesus closely by living a life of simplicity and teaching the Gospel message with great joy.

Francis called for simplicity of life and humility before God. He worked to care for the poor, and one of his first actions after his conversion was to care for lepers. Thousands were drawn to his sincerity, piety and joy. In all his actions, Francis sought to follow fully and literally the way of life demonstrated by Christ in the Gospels. His respect and appreciation for creation was so profound because it always led him to the Creator.

And isn't that the way it often is with us—that creation brings us closer to the creator. This past week I enjoyed as much of the PBS series on our National Parks as I could—when I wasn't dealing with my otherwise complicated life ☺. Perhaps you did too. I was struck by the spiritual theme that ran through the series: the love and gratitude for creation. The stories of those who fought to preserve these remarkable places for everyone, not just the rich or entitled, were inspiring. And in some way, fitting for this day we reflect on St. Francis and our responsibility to care for the earth and its inhabitants.

Said producer Ken Burns, “For the first time in human history, land was set aside, not for kings and noblemen, not for the rich, but for everybody in all time.”

And a park ranger, looking out on just a slice of our 83 million acres of protected land, historic sites and natural wonders, said, “It pulls you out of whatever it is that you are into—into something that's much greater than you. I've never been in any other type of environment that had that capacity to evoke so much wonder.”

Ken Burns said “our molecules will be rearranged” when we're in our national parks, when we're in nature. And as he was interviewed by a CBS reporter at sunrise on Acadia National Park in Maine, he said, “There will be very little anger on this ridge this morning. Very little acquisitiveness, very little greed, very little sadness.”

One of the ways we honor Francis today, of course, is in the blessing of our pets. It was in his conversion to a simple, material-free life, that his appreciation for animals and nature took flight. Francis' love for nature went deeper than a desire to be, and to live, in the woods. Francis believed that nature, that all God's creation, were part of the family of God. The sparrow was as much his brother as the pope.

Those of us who live with pets, or who have lived with them at some time in our life, know that indeed they are part of our family. Not only do they bring nature inside our homes, but they also remind us to “live simply—” “To offer and receive unconditional love, to play, to rest...to simply be in the presence of God and all of creation.

It is all part of our quest to live closer not only to creation, but to the Creator. The land, the animals, the bounty that comes from the land that we so enjoy—especially in this season of autumn and harvest—are gifts of a most gracious God. Our stewardship theme this year is Live Simply, and in celebrating the most basics, most loved gifts of God, we are doing just that. At this table, and in this place, we do what Ken Burns says nature does for us, we let our “molecules be rearranged,” and as Jesus promised, we will find rest for our weary souls.