

Homily Feast of St. Francis/Blessing for the Animals
Sunday, October 2, 2011
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Last week I was at a CREDO Conference in Delray Beach, Florida. CREDO is an intense clergy renewal program sponsored by the Church Pension Fund. My time away was a marvelous experience in many ways. This conference provided me with clarity of purpose to work on issues like my vocational direction, my physical and spiritual health and my finances. The final product of my CREDO week was to develop three goals to achieve as I begin to look towards retirement in nine years.

There was one drawback to the conference though and that was that it took place in Florida. Now I do not have a problem with Floridians and the state does have spectacular beaches. The drawback of Florida for me can best be summed up in the title of the 1970's Jim Stafford song, "I Don't Like Spiders and Snakes!" I really don't like creepy, crawly things and you know Florida is not only invested with creepy, crawly things, but they are super-sized as well. And the truth be told, it becomes more than a little disconcerting to have the opening session of the CREDO conferences held in Florida include warnings about venomous coral snakes, Fire ants, instructions on shaking out shoes before putting them on and checking under the bed covers for water bugs and lizards before going to sleep. And then there are the directions on how to run in a zigzag pattern if an alligator should decide I would make a tasty meal.

Evidently gators can run very fast in short spurts but only in a straight line. So zigzagging as you run away from a gator confuses them and more importantly it also keeps you from being on their dinner menu.

All of this talk of reptiles and insects and directions on how to avoid close encounters with them is enough to make me want to get me on the first plane back to Cleveland; a feeling that was only exacerbated when I was bitten by a Fire ant within three hours of my arrival at the conference center while sitting on an outdoor bench and praying. I don't think this is quite what the scripture means when it speaks of the Holy Spirit setting us on fire!

On the second day of the conference a fellow conference attendee named Rhonda excitedly took my arm and dragged me over to a tree near our lodging to see this enormous Banana spider web in it. And, yes along with the enormous web there was an enormous spider with it. Have you ever seen a Banana spider? They are pretty large; this one had to be about four inches in length, not including its legs.

Clearly Rhonda did not know I don't like spiders and snakes and I will admit that I managed to put up a brave front and not bolt for the nearest airport as she waxed eloquent over that Banana

spider. Also I will say Banana spiders are beautiful in a fashion with elongated carapaces that are colored a bright yellow, ergo their name

But then an interesting thing occurred after Rhonda went her own way; this spider and her web ended up captivating me. I found myself stopping and gazing at them each time I walked by that tree, which was often as it was by the path going toward the building I was lodged in. That web really was glorious, especially in the morning when it had some dew on it and the sun's rays hit it just so.

Robert P. Tristram Coffin wrote a lovely little poem titled The Spider.

With six small diamonds for his eyes
He walks upon the summer skies,
Drawing from his silken blouse
The lacework of his dwelling house.

As my CREDO time unfolded it was the lacework of the spider's dwelling house – it's web - that ended up becoming the context or the theme if you will, of my work there. As my goals for my vocational, physical, spiritual and financial life took shape I began to see that, like the spider's web, these components of my life were intricately connected and interdependent upon one another. One strand could not exist successfully without the others, just like the spider's web could not be successful without each strand being interwoven with the others. For me to have the resources and nourishment for a healthy life into the future each strand of my life's web needed to be well connected, just like that spider's web.

I also came to understand that this need for interconnectivity and healthy co-dependency is equally true of human relationships. None of us can be truly healthy as solo sojourners in life. We are each of us meant to be strands in a web of life that is mutually dependent on only with other people but all of Creation.

That truth is what we celebrate today on the Feast of St. Francis as we bless God's creature's great and small. It is a celebration honoring the intricate, mutually dependent web of life that defines the goodness of the created order. St. Francis is the iconic saint of the Creation God has given us because he is an exemplar of how we are to encounter and engage it; and that is with respect, awe, good stewardship and love.

So whether it is our adorable and huggable dogs and cats, the more intimidating spiders and snakes, or any of God's creatures - even the human ones - what we do today reminds us that they and all life are part of the incredible interconnected web of life that God has created and given us to live in and enjoy. Each has its own particular function and use, each has its own beauty and magnificence. Each is deserving of our respect, our care and our love, even if that sometimes may be from a distance.

Amen.