

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 4, 2026 — FEAST OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Gentle and Humble in Heart*”

Job 39:1–18	(God is the Creator of all things)
Psalms 148:7–14	(Praise to God for all creation)
Galatians 6:14–18	(Paul prays never to boast in anything except Christ's cross)
St. Matthew 11:25–30	(Jesus is humble and gentle; in Him we find rest)

On the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, there is something particularly appropriate about hearing Jesus say, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” For Francis understood something many people spend a lifetime trying to learn: that the way to God is not through the accumulation of wealth, the pursuit of status, or the exercise of power, but through humility, simplicity, love, and trust—resting in *Him*.

Francesco Bernardone was born around the year 1181 into a prosperous merchant family in Assisi, Italy. He had everything a young man of his circumstances might have wanted: money, comfortable surroundings, and the prospect of an exciting life. But in the process of pursuing all that the world could offer, he discovered that having nothing mattered more than having everything.

He took Jesus' commands literally—go forth and preach the Gospel, carrying no bag, bread, or money—trusting completely in God's daily provision. And so, Francis began giving things away. Not because he despised material possessions, but because he wanted to be free to love God and his neighbors without reservation. He exchanged the security of wealth for the uncertainty of poverty, and in doing so discovered a richness that money could never buy—the richness of total dependence on, and intimacy with, the God of the Universe.¹

Jesus begins speaking in today's Gospel lesson after having rebuked the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for rejecting the light they had received through His miracles and teaching. In the face of widespread unbelief, He turned to His Father in prayer, remembering that human rejection does not frustrate God's sovereign purpose. When He speaks of God hiding “these things” from the wise and the intelligent and revealing them instead to “infants,” Jesus is reminding us that through Christ, God revealed the truth of His kingdom to humble disciples, ordinary people, and all who receive Jesus in dependent faith.² Childlike faith is not ignorance; it is a willingness to trust God rather than rely on human wisdom or religious status. Francis understood that.

He approached the world not as something to possess, conquer, or exploit, but as a gift from God to be cherished. Perhaps that is why we remember Francis especially for his love of animals and the natural world. The birds, the wolves, the flowers, the sun, the moon, and even death itself became, for Francis, members of one great family of Creation. He called them brother and sister, not as a poetic affectation, but because he genuinely believed everything belonged to God and therefore deserved our reverence and care.

There is a delightful story of Saint Francis preaching to the birds. While traveling through the Spoleto Valley near Bevagna, Saint Francis saw a large gathering of birds in the trees and on the ground. Filled with deep love for creation, he ran toward them instead of walking past. The birds did not fly away; they waited for him and turned their attention to his voice. Francis called the birds his “little sisters” and treated them as just as he would human companions, telling them they owed great praise to their Creator because He gave them freedom of the air, beautiful plumage without needing to spin or sew, and food without needing to sow or reap. The birds stretched their necks, spread their wings, and bowed reverently. Francis then walked among them, touched them with his habit, and gave them his blessing before they flew off in all directions. Whether every detail happened exactly as the story tells it is less important than what it reveals about his heart. Francis believed that God's love was not reserved for human beings alone, and that creation itself was continually praising its Creator.

And then there is the story of the wolf of Gubbio, a massive, ravenous wolf that was killing the livestock and people, causing villagers to live in extreme fear behind locked gates. Ignoring their warnings, Saint Francis and one of his brave friars walked out to meet the charging beast. Francis made the sign of the cross and called out, “Come here, Brother Wolf. I command you on behalf of Christ that you do no harm to me or to anyone.” The wolf closed its mouth, lay down meekly at Francis’ feet, and placed its paw in the saint’s hand as a pledge. Francis negotiated an agreement: the wolf would stop attacking, and the townspeople would feed the animal daily so that it would no longer hunt them out of hunger.³

Saint Francis saw the world through the eyes of Christ: not as a collection of things to be used or controlled, but as a community of creatures to be loved and treated with gentleness and respect. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about Francis was not his radical poverty, his powerful preaching, or even his love of animals. It was his willingness to become humble enough to receive God’s love. Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart.” Interesting choice of metaphor. A yoke is an instrument of work, something that joins animals together so they can pull a heavy load. Jesus doesn’t promise that following Him will mean we won’t have challenges, suffering, or burdens. Instead, He promises that we need not carry these alone. Francis discovered that the yoke of Christ was not a burden of endless striving to become important, successful, or admired. To be yoked with Christ was the liberating discipline of love. And the more he surrendered his need to possess and control, the more freely he could give of himself to others.

That is a lesson we might especially need to hear in our own time. We live in a world that constantly encourages us to acquire more, accomplish more, achieve more, and make ourselves more important. Even our religious lives can become an arena for striving: trying to be good enough, faithful enough, generous enough, or worthy enough.

That is why today’s Gospel invites us to live differently. It invites us to rest in the awareness that we are already loved unconditionally by God. Francis did not become a saint because he managed to *earn* God’s affection. He became a saint because he allowed God’s love to transform him so completely that it overflowed into his relationships with everyone and everything around him. His fellow friars felt that Francis was so close to Christ and so filled with His love and joy, that he was, in effect, Jesus walking on earth among them.

Saint Francis reminds us that holiness is not necessarily found in extraordinary accomplishments. Most often, it is found in ordinary acts of kindness, in gratitude for the beauty of creation, in generosity toward those in need, in reconciliation where there has been hostility, and in the humility to recognize that we, too, are creatures utterly dependent upon God’s mercy and provision.

So perhaps the question for us on this Feast of Saint Francis is not whether we can imitate his extraordinary life in every detail. Most of us will not abandon everything and live as itinerant preachers who depend on begging. But we *can* ask ourselves whether there is something we might give up for God: a resentment, an ambition, a fear, a possession, or a need to have the last word. How might our lives, and those of others, differ if we looked at the people around us, and even at the creatures and landscapes entrusted to our care, with a little more of Francis’ wonder and tenderness?

Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” The Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi calls us to radical simplicity, deep humility, and compassionate stewardship of all creation. May we discover, as Francis did, that the burden of love is lighter than the burden of selfishness, that humility brings a freedom pride cannot offer, and that the simplest life, lived in the love of Christ, can become a life of extraordinary joy. And as we go forth this day, may we walk through this world with lighter footsteps, gentler hearts, and a renewed commitment to care for the vulnerable, the poor, and all of God’s creatures.

Saint Francis of Assisi, pray for us. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. C. H. Atgeepitce, “Homily for Feast of St. Francis,” 28 September 2026. Used with permission.

² Matthew 11:25 Bible Study, © 2004-2026 Bible Hub < <https://biblehub.com/study/matthew/11-25.htm> > 29 September 2026.

³ Adapt. Murray Bodo, OFM, “St. Francis and the Taming of the Wolf,” October 2017, *St. Anthony Messenger* <<https://www.franciscanmedia.org/st-anthony-messenger/st-francis-and-the-taming-of-the-wolf/>> 29 September 2026.