

SAINT FRANCIS AND THE SQUIRREL

BY

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SAINT FRANCIS AND THE
SQUIRREL

Fall was about ready to descend. The leaves on the ash trees had yellowed and the first strong wind had torn them from the branches, the redbuds had turned greenish yellow and the ginkgo

has begun its march to that glorious gold of Fall. Also the metasequoias had turned that deep rich gold red color just before their descent for the winter, a descent which unlike the oaks leaves no trail, no reminder on those cold winter days of the summer past.

1 THE GARDEN EDGE

I was sitting in the back garden where I was moving my daylily plants about trying to improve the display for the following summer. It was an endless process, like paint on a pallet, like a Manet or Monet, but a living color palette which seemed unlikely to ever converge, but one persists at this process with nature. So there I was, sitting on the edge of the garden and digging and moving and patting the soil.



Then,
along the
edge of
the
railroad
ties
which

line the garden came one of my local squirrels, it was not one I had seen before, but a new one. He seemed quite friendly and as he approached it almost looked as if he was smiling at me, a whiskered squirrel smile. I smiled back, and then I stopped, and thought, perhaps I was taking this animal conversation stuff a bit too far. Perhaps I should spend more time with humans, but, alas, he walked up and said:

“Hello, Sir, I see you are preparing for winter.”

I replied:

“Yes, I am, and who perchance are you Mister Squirrel?”

He replied:

“ I am Francesco Squirrel, and a distant relative of that Antnee, the rather rotund young man who as you have learned is a bit filled with himself.”

I replied:

“Yes, yes, indeed he is, a bit. But I gather it is the affliction of youth, older men learn patience and wisdom, and gardening helps a great deal.”

2 RELATIVES

Francesco then began to tell me his family history. He started:

“Well, Sir, as we have recorded it, we came here more than one hundred winters past. Our great-great etc grandfather, Guiellmo Squirrel, he came from Assisi in Italy, in the baggage of a family who had a small

but failing farm in Assisi. The man’s name was Giuseppe Gargiuolo.”

He continued:

“Old Giuseppe came with his wife and three children and one of the children, Maria Gargiuolo loved our old great-great-grandparent Guillermo so much she hid him in her coat, and fed him across the great waters. When he arrived at the island in the water’s end they were going to take him and well, you know sir, what they do to us, well, our grandparent escaped, ran across the water pipe connecting the island at the end of the water to New Jersey, and then, here we are. The winters here are of course much colder but we survive, we have you humans as usual to help us. “

“That was one of the things that Saint Francis promised us in return for our

help. He said: “*For all time, God will make certain that humans will feed and care for squirrels, and that squirrels should stay close to humans to remind them of the joys of life and the glory of God.*” That is a nice thing for the Saint to have done, is it not sir?”

3 SAINT FRANCIS

I then asked Francesco what the squirrels remembered about Saint Francis and he sat back and said in a somewhat more austere tone:

“Well Sir, we do not record our memories in writing as you do, we record in memory and word, handed down from squirrel to squirrel, and we try our best to be exact in each handing down. We have a group of the squirrels who all remember and we have a senior remembered, in the

current case, that is me Sir, yes indeed, I am the senior *rememberer*, and I am the one who will hand it down to the next generation. It is an awesome duty, Sir, we have seconds just in case I were to perish, Sir, but until I do I have the duty, yes Sir.”

He continued:

“So let me tell the tale. The good Saint, Sir, when he first started to understand God and when he desired to be a better man, the Saint, Sir, he often went to the forest to pray. There he saw us, carefree, and running about, and in those days we just ignored him, for he was a human devoid of food. We did our usual things; we found nuts, we ate, we played chasing one another up and down the trees, we slept in the sun, and when it was cold and rainy we sat

with our tails over our heads covering and warming ourselves.”

“The Saint, Sir, was troubled, he had great wealth and he had a family who wanted him to work just in growing the wealth. The Saint you may know Sir was also a soldier, he had seen war Sir, he had seen men die, and he had killed men himself in battle, Sir. That made him question, Sir, for he also believed in God and wanted to do good, but what did that mean. So the Saint would spend many days in the forest and soon we began to talk with him, as we do with you Sir. He asked us how we could be so carefree, he asked us what we thought of God,, and we explained to him that God gave us freedom, and that we scamper about, because in this freedom we found joy. That joy does not come from possessing but from the freedom to do good to others.”

“We could see Sir that this made him suffer, since he had great wealth and a family which demanded much from him. He continued to talk with us, he gained much insight and one day he came and said to us: *“I shall forsake all and live like you in the forest, I shall do God’s will and I shall be like your squirrels, free to tell men of what I have found and free to seek the joy of God.”*”

He continued:

“Thus, Sir, began the journey of the Saint.”

Francesco continued:

“The Saint befriended many animals, for that he is well known Sir. There of course is the story of the Saint and the birds. Well this one, Sir, we take

exception to, yes indeed Sir we do. For it was said that the Saint drew the birds to him and he preached to them about how fortunate they are that Gods feeds them and waters them and dresses them. Yes indeed Sir the Saint did say that but the facts Sir are a bit different. We Sir brought the birds to him, we thought it would create a greater crowd, in fact we spoke with him afore hand, and he agreed, and we wanted him to speak to all of us.”

“ We were so busy Sir managing the crowd, pushing the people close to him, watching overhead, that he forgot about us until the end. But then he did remember and he said: *“People, as the beautiful birds about you have been praised let me also give praise to those who work with me those who share my mission those who obtain their food and sustenance from the kindness of the many as we all go about praising*

God, my close friends, the squirrels and the crows, for they show that true joy results from our actions, joy in the acceptance of God and his kindness, joy from being amongst you and seeing your faces as we preach his words and your acceptance of them. For God will leave to each of you as a reminder of his joy, both squirrels and crows, dressed plainly as we brother are so dressed, and seeking your charity as we brothers do, and praising God every day as we brothers do, and sharing God’s joy with you. So play with my brothers, for they are my reminder to you every day.””

I sat there enthralled that here was a squirrel with such a deep theological understanding, he was lecturing me, and I, his student, sat listening intently. Francesco was now on a roll, and he continued:

“Then there is the story of the Saint and the wolf. Well it goes as follows Sir. The Saint was in the city of Gubbio not far from Assisi and there was a wolf outside the city in the forest and it was terrifying the city people. The Saint went to the forest and prayed and waited for the wolf. In fact, Sir, if truth be told, we were there, the squirrels, and also my friends the crows. We could see the wolf, a very ferocious wolf indeed, and we went to the Saint and suggested that we had a possible solution. The wolf, like us, wanted food. He did not want to do harm but he was just a wolf. Like the scorpion, who also did not want to do harm, but he was just a scorpion and all too often would jut bite people and animals. Thus we said to the Saint, Sir, that we would speak with the wolf, and if the people would feed him then he would not attack the people. For indeed, Sir, that is what he had done

for us, he had told people we were God’s creatures and they should both feed us and take joy in our presence.”

“Then we found the wolf and spoke with him. Wolves, Sir, can be difficult, especially if one is a squirrel, but we spoke with him for several days, we told him that he would be fed, but he said the townspeople would trick him and then kill him. He could not trust them. We then spoke to him about the Saint and how he had helped us, for now we were fed, we did not toil in the fields as we once did, people fed us in the town squares, from their homes, and indeed we became good friends of the people. After many days, Sir, the wolf agreed to meet the Saint.”

“When the Saint saw us coming he did have some fear, since man is meant to fear wolves Sir, but we assured the Saint that the wolf would be no

danger. The Saint then spoke to the wolf, and the wolf agreed to do no harm if he were fed, for he was still a wolf, and it was in his nature. The Saint said he understood, for if it was in his nature then God had made it so and man could not change it.”

“Then we all went to the square in Gubbio, the Saint in front, the wolf along his right side. The crows were lookouts, and we Sir, we were all along the side, letting the people know that they should have no fear. It was a long procession, Sir, a parade of animals so to speak Sir. For the people knew us and knew that we would not bring fear to their lives. The Saint then told the towns-people of his plan, they all looked about and agreed. From that day forward, the wolf was always fed, until his last day, and no one was ever hurt in Gubbio. The people there remember this to this very day.”

I replied:

“That is a touching story. There are I believe many poems about this event in Italian, the Italians remember this about the Saint and have written extensively.”

Francesco then said:

“Sir, I do not mean to demean the Saint, but the people fail to remember us, for we were playing a great part here, all too much goes to the wolf, was he dangerous, yes Sir he was, but he was an old lone wolf, and whenever we got someone like him to the Saint, well Sir, I must say, we always seem on the edge of history, not quite in it.”

I replied:

“Francesco, I can now see that you squirrels did indeed play an important part. For how would we have joy if we had to speak with wolves, few of us would. For is it not true Francesco, that people will sit in a park and will feed squirrels all day long, with no fear, black ones, grey ones, brown ones.”



Francesco replied:

“Point well taken Sir, thank you for that insight. I guess we have been

respected, we continue to work for the Saint.”

4 OTHER DESCENDENTS FROM ASSISI

Francesco then continued:

“You must remember, Sir, that Saint Francis was closest with squirrels and crows, and the image of him with the other birds and rabbits is truly a fiction Sir, a true fiction. I suspect it was because we squirrels and crows were the smartest, also we had the most fun, and Saint Francis enjoyed fun, yes Sir, he thought fun was God’s way of showing humans that God was good and cared for them.”

He continued:

“I offer you as proof of the Saints remembrance of us squirrels, Sir, the

fact that the Franciscans are in three orders; the grey, the brown, and the black. Do you know why they chose those colors, Sir, do you know? They did indeed choose them Sir because we squirrels come in three colors; grey like me, brown like those in the north and black like many you see in the cities. The colors the Good Saint's followers chose were to honor the work we did to help the Good Saint himself. Does anyone ever remember that, alas Sir, no, but we do, we squirrels, and to us it is an honor to see the colors wherever we do, it gives us a sense of a bond, yes Sir, a bond, to all of God's creatures."

"The descendents of our relatives from Assisi went to many places with the followers of the Saint. They went north to England, Ireland and France, they went west to Spain, and east to Russia

and China, then to India and many places. All we needed were a few trees, a few nuts, a little water, and humans of course, we always need to stay near humans, it was our mission."

I asked him:

"Were there any places where you did not go."

Francesco replied:

"Alas Sir, we could not go to the deserts, there were no trees, and for that reason there is little joy there, we could not help spread the Saint's message to the treeless sands and the humans who live there. We have gone around them, for we are in the south of Africa, but alas not in the true deserts. We have spoken with the camels to help but they speak very little and the work very hard. They

seem also to have little joy, have you ever seen a camel playing Sir, indeed not, they work very hard sir, and thus joy is little in them.”

5 THE CROW

As we continued our conversation I heard the flapping of wings and in no time before us landed two crows. Before I knew it walking to me is a large black crow, elegant and standing in a direct upright manner and approached Francesco and said:

“Francesco, good to see you again, and how is this human going, are you preaching to him as usual?”

I was stopped by this statement.

Francesco said to me:

“Sir, this is my good friend Carmine Crow, Carmine, and like our family came from Assisi. Also his cousin Antonio Crow. Remember that I told you of Maria, well Carmine’s ancestor was brought over by Maria’s cousin, Isabella. Isabella was also from Assisi. Carmine, tell Sir how your family came here.”

The Carmine turned and with his large crow beak looked into my face and began to speak:

“As Francesco may have told you, Sir, Maria Gargiuolo had Francesco’s ancestor in her coat, and Isabella had taken my ancestor along as well. We four had a great time on the crossing, Francesco’s ancestor would go up and down the ships masts, and mine would fly between them and they would.....”

Francesco interrupted:

“Carmine, tell what happened when we arrived, Sir does not have all day...”

He turned to me and said:

“Carmine likes to tell all the details, if we let him he would talk all day, crows are like that you know, talk, talk, talk.”

Carmine then continued:

“Well, as we remember it, when we all arrived on the island at the end of the water, the families were told that no animals were allowed, and that the animals would be caught and....I cannot even say it Sir. It would have been tragic, yes indeed tragic Sir. Well, our two ancestors decided to escape, and we asked which way? For Francesco’s relative there was one sure exit, over the ramp from the island to the mainland. There he scampered and

the two girls waved farewell, they knew they would meet again however. Then my ancestor, well, he was a crow, and before anyone knew it he was aloft and following Francesco, so we went west, they always said go west young man.....”

Francesco interrupted again:

“Carmine, focus, focus, keep to the story, Sir does not want to hear your musings of going west. He always wanted to go west Sir and be with cowboys, I try to tell him they may not be as receptive, but, Sir, he continues to dream. Continue Carmine.”

Carmine was a bit ruffled, he strutted around a few times, in small circles, as if trying to gain his composure.

Carmine then continued:

“So off our ancestors went, Sir, they knew that they must spread joy, for that is what the Saint has sought, what we had taught him, and what God desired. So west they went, to New Jersey. But we were sad, for they knew Maria and Isabella were now alone, could they find them. They stopped on the docks on the shore and discussed a strategy.”

Carmine went on:

“Then, Sir, at the edge of the island, the two saw Isabella and Maria, there they were, waving, and each put a red ribbon in their hair. They now knew Sir how to follow them. So for weeks, our ancestor crow would fly above and track the two little ones with the red ribbons, and then the day came, they were let out, and the families moved to Hoboken, just where we were Sir, a miracle, indeed, Sir, a miracle. The

Saint had heard our prayers. In no time we were reunited. We have stayed close ever since. That is why we have moved out here. It is close to the family.”

I said:

“That is an amazing tale you two, very loyal, very intelligent.”

The three animals smiled at me, Francesco, Carmine and Antonio.

6 THE ROCK

I then asked the two of them what they meant by joy, what was the Saint trying to tell people through the squirrels and the crows. Then I saw a smile on Francesco’s face and he turned to Carmine and he said:

“Let’s give Sir an example.”

Francesco then turn to me, along with Carmine, and it was as if both were ready to burst out laughing. The Francesco said:

“Sir, do you remember last summer, when you and Lady Sara were trying to remove that great rock?”

I replied:

“Ah yes, that 300 pound boulder.”

He then went on:

“And do you remember, Sir, let me recall for you, since we all saw it from a better vantage point.”

I interrupted:

“You were watching me?”

He replied:

“Yes indeed Sir, you bring us great joy too. Carmine and all his family stopped their wanderings as did my entire family, we all sat atop the large ash trees and looked down, it was quite amusing Sir.”

I replied:

“Yes I remember.”

Francesco continued:

“Sir, you were sitting in the mud, the large boulder between your legs, and the good Lady Sara holding the large iron bar, leveraging the boulder as you rolled it out of its hole. Then the boulder rolled, you sitting there Sir, and the boulder rolling towards you out of its hole, and we saw that your

pants, Sir, yes you pants, were now slipping totally off and into the mud and the boulder, and you Sir, in front of the good Lady Sara, were now bare as a chipmunk, bare butt but not bushy tailed as they say Sir, and then what did you do Sir.”

I smiled and replied:

“I looked at the Missus and said that we should look at our selves and see how foolish we looked and then we both laughed.”

Francesco replied:

“That is joy sir, indeed that is true joy.”

I replied:

“Francesco, I see what you are saying, we did not fight it we just, to use a

phrase, rolled with it, loss of pants and all. The mud was a bit cold however.”

Francesco said:

“You did not loose your dignity, you did not scream and yell, and now the boulder sits at the edge of the garden, a backdrop for the lovely grasses you planted, and it add beauty and gives continuing joy Sir. And also you and the good Lady Sara have something to remember, that also is joy Sir.”

I replied:

“I see Francesco, I am beginning to understand the idea of joy. So that is what you taught the Saint as well.”

He replied:

“Yes, our ancestor taught the Saint that joy is from God and joy comes

from the small things, it comes from how we handle the small things and how we then take and look at them as small but growing achievements for ourselves and others.”

Carmine then spoke:

“And frankly Sir, no disrespect meant, but you looked funnier than any one of Gods creatures as you were bare bottomed in mud with a boulder rolling towards your middle. That shows us that that the big brain you are so proud of may sometimes function less well than ours.”

He then laughed as I have never heard a crow laugh. I too found it amusing to recall.

7 KAZANTZAKIS

I then looked at the two of them and asked a heavy question. I said:

“You both have heard of Νίκος Καζαντζίκης the man from Crete who wrote a book of the Saint, who portrayed him as a man suffering, suffering with the pains of the human flesh, its desires and the like.”

Then the squirrel and crow burst out in laughter, I had never seen such from any animal, the crow bent over cawing and cawing, and Francesco went on his back with his four paws holding his fat little tummy, laughing only as a squirrel could, and then Francesco said:

“Cretans, they are not Greeks, Greeks are happy, the Cretans, they always are suffering, and Nikos, poor Nikos, he

suffers the most. The Saint, Sir, he was a happy man, he had found God, after all Sir he played with us every day, he taught us and we taught him, we are all God's creatures, and we show that in our joy, not our pain and sorrow."

He continued:

"Why God could have chosen a worm or a turtle, not a fine squirrel and crow for the Saint, a smart elegant crow, and a happy joyful squirrel, that Sir is what God gave the Saint, not what the man from Crete would like you to believe, we have been there Sir, we know, and we live our lives every day with that understanding."

He continued:

"But poor Nikos, he was always suffering, always looking, always not listening to what was at his very feet.

For it is told, Sir, told by our very ancestors, for we had a distant uncle, one Phondas Squirrel, his real name was Xenophon but we all called him Phondas, who knew the good Nikos personally. The stories from Phondas, Sir, the time he tried to bring joy to Nikos, but to no avail sir, Nikos would not see what joy was, he always looked upon the dark side, Sir, the dark side."

I then asked:

"Tell me, what did Phondas say about him."

Francesco replied:

"Well Sir, Phondas had a good eye, he was from Athens, that is Sir, he was born there, and as he grew he jumped a ship one day and ended up in Herakilon, the large city in Crete. Well Sir, Phondas went about old Crete and

he saw something he found amazing. The statues in Crete, Sir, the old statues, they have no smiles, Sir, no smiles.”

“He would always say, Sir, that the Greek statues always had a twinkle, that smile of joy, Sir, a true smile. He would say you could tell a great deal about a people by looking at their statues. The Cretans had no smile. Nikos also had no smile. His view of the Saint was a man who suffered, no Sir, the Saint did not suffer, he sought the joy of God, and joy comes from having little and enjoying every day by being with others and helping them, yes Sir, that is true joy, not having things, but in having just the minimum, and sharing. We, Sir, look at the feeder in your own yard, we share, we are up there dumping the seed upon the ground, so all share. Some think, Sir, that we are pigs, I mean no

disrespect Sir to those pig friends, but they do over eat a bit Sir. Yet we share, we send seed down and whenever a sparrow needs space, Sir, we move aside. We let all share.”

The more I listened to Francesco the more I was learning. The Saint had himself gained a great deal from these small creatures of God, they taught him that sharing was important, they taught him the joys of life, they showed him how to share this with others.

8 FAREWELL

When the leaves begin to fall, when the trees start their winter slumber, when the green goes gold, then gone, then, and only then do we settle softly in the slumber of the long winter. The snow silently sifting through the oak trees, branches holding flakes upon flakes,

each balanced so delicately one atop
the other, then out my back window I
see Francesco, atop the rail on the
deck, tail atop his head, snow blowing
the strands of fur hair in the wind, I
see the smile, I see the glint in the eye,
then jumping across to the maple and
up to the empty bird house, the entry
gnawed open for his furry flesh to fit,
and in he goes, then out pops his head,
I can see the wink in his right eye, the
wave from the paw, and then good
night, and oh by the way, “Merry
Christmas, Francesco”.

