

Sermon by Steve Cook, St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Portland, Oregon, May 10, 2026

Good morning. And Happy Mother's Day to all, including everyone who is a mother, and everyone who has or had a mother and grandmothers.

I'm going to talk about a number of things today: mothers, Mother Earth, St. Francis of Assisi, the enormity of time, and our obligations to future generations.

I'll start by considering a woman named Pica who was born around the year 1160 to a "noble" family in Fance. She was married off to a wealthy Italian merchant. The story told is that around 1181 she was in the midst of a long and painful labor, and feared for both her own life and that of her baby, when there appeared an unknown stranger, dressed in the clothing of a pilgrim. The stranger told Pica that her child would not come into the world until she had been conveyed to a stable. She asked to be carried to the stable, where, among the animals, she successfully gave birth to a son, who was named Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone. Giovanni grew up to be the holy man we know as St. Francis of Assisi.

Francis of Assisi is one of my favorite Catholic Saints. He is known for many things, including humility, a commitment to the poor, and a deep love for nature and animals.

There are many entertaining stories about Francis' life. Before he became a monk and a holy man, as a rich and handsome young man, he was a real party boy. As the years went by, and he experienced more of life, including serving as a soldier and being held as a prisoner for a year, he began to reconsider. He started to identify with the poor, and gave away money, mainly his father's money, to the poor and for the restoration of a local church. His father was not pleased, and tried two of the worst strategies imaginable for persuading Francis to change—beating him and locking him up in the family home. Finally, farther and son squared off in legal proceedings, and Francis renounced his father and any share in the family wealth. Legend has it that, to underline the point, he took off all the clothes

he was wearing, in court, and walked out naked, since the clothes had been paid for by his father.

St. Bonaventure wrote a biography of St. Francis, and in it he relates a remarkable story. He was at a point where he questioned his calling, and asked two of his closest colleagues what he should do. When they responded that he should preach the Gospel, the first audience he preached it to was...a flock of birds. In fact, another biographer reports that ““From that day on, [Francis] carefully exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures, to praise and love the creator...”

The story also goes that despite what most of the community viewed as eccentricity, even madness, Pica, his mother, stuck with her son. When Francis' father imprisoned him in the family home, Pica let him out. Eventually, after Francis' father died, she followed Francis in living a pious, monastic life.

I've been thinking a lot about Francis the last couple of weeks because Marianne and I recently spent a couple of days in Assisi, Italy, visiting places Francis knew, and joining a service held in his tomb. That visit put a number of things into my head, including time, our obligations to our neighbors, and our obligations to the earth.

Italy reminds us that time is very long. The basilica where Francis' remains are interred was started in 1228, 800 years ago. And in Italy, of course, we saw Roman ruins and buildings dating back 2000 years. In museums we saw artifacts from cultures that predated the Romans—including pots, pans, and jewelry from Bronze Age cultures that existed as much as 10,000 years ago.

On a global scale, even those 10,000 years are just a grain of sand on a very big beach. We now know that our earth is about four and a half billion years old.

Our own faith, Christianity, is now over 2,000 years old. and portions of the Tanakh, also known as the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament, are thought to be as much as 3,000 years old.

And yet we humans are so focused on what happens tomorrow, next week and next month. It's as if we're walking down a path that is many miles long, staring at our cellphones, checking the latest postings on social media every minute.

If it wasn't so harmful, our focus on the immediate would be laughably absurd. Some observers decry the focus in business on the profits of the current quarter, and urge investors and businesses to instead focus on longer timelines, such as a few years. But even a few years are nothing compared to the 2,000+ year history of Christianity, the 10,000 years of human civilization, and the 4.5 billion years of the history of the earth.

Let's pivot, for a moment, to today's Gospel lesson. Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God, and the second is to love our neighbors, and that all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus makes clear that our neighbors are not limited to folks of our ethnicity, or our religion, but that we must love **all** people. Jesus means **all** people, since he tells us we must love even our enemies.

This means that everyone is my neighbor, that I must love everyone, and that everyone includes not just nice folks next door, friends from work, and my own children and grandchildren, but also folks whose politics I detest, people in prison, even for dreadful crimes, immigrants, legal and undocumented, people whose appearances are very different from mine, etc. **EVERYONE. NO EXCEPTIONS.**

Most of us get that, even if we have trouble living it.

St. Francis makes clear that our neighbors also include non-humans—the birds and animals he reportedly preached to, the plants we share the world with, and even the sun, moon and stars, all of whom he refers to as our brothers and sisters.

And yet...we don't think enough about our neighbors through time. When we become a mother or a father, or an aunt or uncle, we start to think more about the future the precious new child will live, including decades beyond our own deaths. And when we become grandparents or great aunts and

uncles, we are likely to think two generations in the future, to the world those new children will inhabit, stretching our concern two generations beyond our lifespans. Even that is myopic.

You may have heard of the Seven Generations Principle, the edict that "In every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation," which is often attributed to the Great Law of Peace, the oral constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy. If a generation is 25 years, that principle directs us to consider the impact of our actions on the next 175 years.

The designers, stonecutters, masons, painters, and so on who built the Basilica in Assisi where Francis is buried created a building that is still strong, beautiful, inspiring and serving the faithful 32 generations, or 800 years later. Jesus lived 80 generations ago. So did the Romans, and many of the things they built and sculptures they carved still stand. Similarly, ideas, architecture, philosophy and theology from the last 2000 years still form much of the foundation of our present society.

When we look back in this way, we see that people who lived 800 or 2000 years ago are very much still our neighbors, as they created so much of the world we live in today.

With this perspective, the logic of the Christian faith compels us to consider all living people our neighbors, and also to consider all people who will live in the future our neighbors as well. As Francis taught, our neighbors also include animals and plants and Mother Earth. What Francis did and taught has continued to have an impact on people 800 years after his death. So, too, what we do today will continue to have an impact on people 800 years into the future, and beyond.

Just as humans have been on this earth for hundreds of thousands of years, I have every reason to believe they will continue to be on this earth for many more thousands of years. While we'll be long gone, it will be the same earth. The world inhabited by future generations will bear our imprint 800 and even 2000 years from now and just as the world still bears the imprints of the Romans and of Francis.

I want to digress for just a moment to speak to the apocalyptic thread of Christianity. **Apocalypticism** is the religious belief that the end of the world is imminent, even within one's own lifetime. This belief is usually accompanied by the idea that civilization will soon come to a tumultuous end due to some sort of catastrophic global event. Apocalypticism is common among religions, and has long been a thread in the fabric of Christianity. I once had a conversation with a guy who argued that we didn't need to care for the environment, because Jesus would be returning any day now, making our efforts to care for the earth moot.

That conversation occurred over 40 years ago. Some Christians have been certain the world was coming to an end soon for 2000 years now. I am NOT a trained theologian. Pastor Amy and anyone else with theological training may wince when I say this, but my response to the idea that the world will end soon is "I'm simply not buying it". I believe that just as we're here dealing with the problems of the world 2,000 years after Jesus, and 800 years after St. Francis, our descendants, and God's other creatures, will be living on this earth in 800 and 2,000 years, and how we care for, or trash God's creation now will have an impact on their lives. They are our neighbors just as much as you and I are neighbors. We need to love them, and we need to do our best to leave them a world in which nature thrives and people thrive, both in material and spiritual terms.

This long view is, of course, God's view of the world and its people. We may live 75 years, 100 in exceptional cases, but God is eternal, seeing the truly long view, from creating the Earth...to sending us Jesus...to gifting us St. Francis..to how we live our lives today...to the countless generation who will live on this good earth in future centuries.

It's also akin to the perspective of a good mother and a good father. A parent must focus on the challenges of the day—making sure their beloved child is fed, dressed, sent off to school, tucked into a safe and comfortable bed at night. Parents are also preparing that child for the child's own life, a life which parents hope will extend well beyond their own deaths.

I'm not saying we don't need to focus on the challenges of the moment. We do have to get dressed today, make the coffee, wash the dishes, make

sure we and our loved ones are fed. As my wife is fond of saying, it's a "yes and" matter. Yes, we have to focus on the true challenges of the moment, AND we ALSO need to think about, love and care for those who will inhabit the future.

On this Mother's Day I also think of the images I saw, ubiquitous in Italy, of Mary, Jesus' mother. As a Protestant, I sometimes found myself puzzled when I saw Mary's image more than the image of Jesus. At the same time, I valued seeing the many images of Mary, often holding baby Jesus, particularly the many simple, street-corner shrines. As one Italian explained it, these images of Mary one passes in the streets in daily life make Mary, and others pictured in the shrines, very present, like a kind friend or neighbor who watch over you, and to whom you say "hello" as you pass each day.

Images of Mary holding baby Jesus remind us of the long how we sometimes see God as having characteristics of a loving mother, as in the 91st Psalm, when it says "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge ..."

I had a wonderful mother, so seeing these images of Mary and baby Jesus often remind me of her love. I bet they did the same for Saint Francis, who had a bad relationship with a father who didn't understand or accept him, but a good relationship with his loving and understanding mother. I was also struck by the ages of these images. Often they are centuries old, and have been watching over generation after generation of neighbors.

So, how do we love all of our neighbors, including those who will be living right here in our city, our state, our country, our world, 100, 800 and 2000 years from now? There are probably as many good strategies as there are people here in the sanctuary. For some it may mean focusing on educating future generations, for others on providing affordable, accessible and equitable health care over the long haul. I have a particular perspective, which focuses on the health of the natural world so that both nature and people thrive far into the future. For me that has meant working in land conservation, primarily with land trusts, and working to limit global warming by speeding up the transition from burning fossil fuels.

We here at St. Andrews have a long history of “future-oriented” work. For many years we long had a strong youth program that helped for the moral framework for scores of young people. This congregation and those youth helped build dozens of homes in poor shanty towns on the Mexican side of the border, many of which are still standing today. Just a few years ago the members of this congregation put a lot of effort and money into covering the roof of our sanctuary with solar panels which create a lot of clean electricity, putting a meaningful dent in the need for our local utility to buy or generate electricity from burning fossil fuels. Many of us have bought more fuel-efficient cars or even electric cars, bought more efficient appliances, installed heat pumps, and put solar panels on our own homes.

Therefore, I know that I am, both literally and figuratively, to some degree “preaching to the choir”.

I want to close with two things.

First, a common saying you may have heard, that captures part of what I’m talking about, particularly for those of us here in the sanctuary who are over 65: “The one who plants trees, knowing that he or she will never sit in their shade, has at least started to understand the meaning of life.”

The second is to have our good neighbor St. Francis himself speak directly to us for a moment, over the short distance of 800 years, through portions of a song and prayer he wrote known as “the Canticle of the Sun”:

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which you give sustenance to Your

creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give Him thanks and serve Him with
great humility.