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Episcopal Church at Yale  
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An old man came to a town and advertised his special services while he was there. “Bring me your stones,” he said. “And in exchange I will give you a bag of precious jewels.”

And so everyone in the town gathered all the stones they have been carrying and holding onto all these years, cinched them in a big sack, hauled it over their shoulders, and dragged it slowly in the direction of where the man had set up camp at the edge of town. Things they had been carrying for years, all that is heavy, all that had been weighing them down, their grievances, their losses, their burdens, their guilt...and dumped them at the feet of this stranger. And as promised, in return, the old man would reach behind him and grab a small bag full of beautiful stones – some orange, some green, some dazzlingly blue.

Townfolk after townfolk came to him, dumping their stones at his feet, walking away with a fistful of diamonds and sapphires and emeralds. No one knew where the jewels came from, and no one wanted to ask. All were eager to begin their jubilant walk home. There was no one to observe the old man’s secret.

No one watched him as he opened a sack, took out stone after stone, and cracked each one open on the edge of a larger stronger rock. And out of each of them popped a small jewel. Brilliant and pure, hidden in the middle of a heavy, burdensome stone. And he would collect them in a small bag and place it beside him. And when the next person arrived, he would hand over the bag of jewels. And he would begin again, taking out stone after stone, cracking them open, and revealing a small jewel.

This was a very wise man. He knew what it can take some of us a lifetime to learn.

That hidden within every awful burden each of us carry, there lies a precious jewel. The secret is, we cannot crack them open ourselves. Someone else must do that for us. We may carry them for a very long time. But one day, we will need to lay them at the feet of another, who listens compassionately and helps transform them.

And in so doing, they may become precious gift to someone else.

And on this fast day of St. Francis, let us take note that this treasure we now have is of an entirely different kind. We are richer because of it, and not in the usual sense.

St. Francis is revered for his humility, his tenderness, his extravagant love for creation and for the poor.

He was born in the late 12c with two advantages many of us wish we had: a wealthy family and a charming, magnetic personality. He was always happy and upbeat and a natural leader. He had the world at his feet. And yet God somehow called, and Francis responded with “yes” — and ultimately threw off his fancy clothes and lived in deliberate poverty. The Gospel became his guide for how to live and for how those who gathered around him should live together.

What Francis understood was that true joy and peace does not come from power, prestige or possessions. True treasures are not bought or sold or hoarded.

The Franciscan understanding of Gospel authority — the authority to heal and renew people and things — is not found in money or office or degree or bearing, but rather it resides in the “inner authority” of those people who have loved, suffered, let go, and found renewal on a new level. It resides in taking seriously the Gospel message and living it — with all the courage we can muster and quite a bit of help from the Holy Spirit. Francis made room for the new by letting go of the old. For

him, the “old” is all the things most of us recognize as success. He had to let go of that in order to live a new life as someone so enflamed by God’s love that he was beloved by the creatures of the wild and the poor alike. Francis was a man of humble and complete love, and his love for others was transformative. His poverty set him free.

Today we gather with pictures of our pets, or an image in our hearts — asking for a blessing for them, because for many of us, it is our beloved pet whose mere mention fills us with love, a love that has expanded our hearts to depths we didn’t know possible. If it’s a pet we’ve lost who comes to mind, it is love tinged with a deep and aching sorrow, and as deep a gratitude. We have been gifted extravagantly, and the price we pay is terrible pain when they go.

Our 17 year old beloved dog Haley passed away about a year after I became a mother. Kerith and I brought home two babies just months apart — which was not a very smart thing to do, I’m not afraid to admit it — and it occurred to me more than once in those chaotic exhausting early months that perhaps I was really just meant to be a dog mom. I was good at loving dogs.

Pets make it easy, of course. They never say hurtful things. They never frustrate you by throwing tantrums or refusing to go to sleep. And they certainly never reject things you feed them. They are grateful for everything.

But it dawned on me that if I could love a dog with such fierceness, then surely Jesus’ command to love was not out of reach. I had already proven myself capable of it. Now I had to go do it, even when it is difficult or inconvenient or requires Herculean amounts of patience.

We bless our pets today as a thank you, as an acknowledgment that they are already blessed and blessing, already guides and leaders, teaching each of us that the depth of our love is greater than we ever

thought possible. Allowing us to know from the inside that our flawed, needy, overtired, distracted human hearts are capable of pure love. That we with grace can turn burdens into treasures.

Ultimately, this is who Francis of Assisi and the other saints are: human beings who have gone before us, showing us that unbounded, steadfast love is not impossible. Rather, it is transformative and life-changing. But love requires us to let go of the things we think bestow authority and prestige upon us, or keep us comfortable. We have to choose to be humble, to be channels of peace, to be extravagant in our love. To find our treasure in our vulnerability, in trusting another with our deepest burdens. To be the people our pets think we actually are already.

Amen.