

## **Feast of St. Francis**

**Matthew 11:16-30**

**Sunday, October 4, 2020**

There is a legend of St. Francis of Assisi regarding his response to an ambitious novice who asked for a psalter. Francis accordingly replied, “When you have a psalter, you will want a breviary; and when you have a breviary, you will install yourself in a throne like a great prelate, and you will command your brother: ‘Bring me my breviary!’ ” Francis then took some ashes from the hearth and rubbed them into his body, all the while repeating, “I’m a breviary! I’m a breviary! I’m a breviary!” The saint we commemorate today--Francis--was not your garden variety saint or shrinking violet. Indeed, while preaching early in his ministry, Francis often would dance, weep, make animal sounds, strip to his underwear, or play the medieval guitar. Many people regarded him as mad, or dangerous. They threw dirt at him. Women locked themselves in their houses. Let’s just say that Francis wouldn’t make it through the ordination process of the Church today!

Which is, perhaps, one of the important reasons for remembering Francis. He underscores the idiosyncratic ways that God is at work in the world through the various vehicles of human lives. Francis of Assisi was a little wild, a little out there, a little unpredictable. He pretty much

did what he felt called to. He certainly wasn't afraid of what other people thought. Initially, raised in wealth and prosperity, he began to question that life and his responsibility to those less fortunate, culminating in the understanding: To obey Jesus, you have to join those who are abandoned. His desire to let go of earthly trappings, enraged his father to the point where he was about to be disowned. However, that didn't matter to Francis because, as legend has it, he disowned his father first and all the trappings of his former life by stripping naked in the square in Assisi and walking away from all that he had. In a way, the insight of Francis partially mirrors that of the Buddha: letting go of attachments free us from that which binds and frees us for life. The spiritual order that St. Francis created asked the same of all who would join it. In essence, give up all that you have, and follow God.

Again, Francis would be a challenge to any of our notions of comportment and propriety today. Yet, here we have a shining example of one who seeks not only to profess love of God and neighbor but seeks to live that out in very real, tangible, and demanding ways.

Simplicity. Poverty. Humility. All mark the character of the life that St. Francis felt called to, and the source of his calling was Jesus himself. The rule that Francis developed was as simple and as difficult as, "Follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and walk in his

footsteps.” The legend of the breviary story underscores how faith was to be embodied. We, literally, were to bear the words of God in ourselves and our actions, not simply by uttering words from the pages of a worship book. Our lives were to be the proclamation of and for God’s presence and action in the world. Indeed, Francis’ famously declared, “Preach at all times. If necessary, use words.”

Simplicity. Poverty. Humility. More of what we all could use these days, particularly in this political season. Indeed. However, I don’t know about you, but when I hear Francis’ rule--follow the teachings of Jesus and walk in his footsteps--when I recognize the call to proclaim is one that is more of action and less of words, and that simplicity, poverty, and humility are the legs of the stool of faith, I find it overwhelming. While I can intellectually recognize the freedom that comes with literally shedding the stuff of life, I know that I am tied too tightly to many of the trappings of our modern world. The things, the stuff that attracts, seduces, appeals. Yet, at the same time, the very things that insulate us from looking at ourselves or prevent us from engaging with the core of who we are. This is the reminder that we are not what we own. Rather, our identity comes from whose we are. Far from some sentimental remembrance of a nice person, a feast days like this one of Francis should shake us out of complacency and self-congratulation into

a difficult assessment of what we do and how do we respond to God's call? What impact does faith make on life?

Francis' model of the godly life also seems such a juxtaposition to Jesus' words at the end of today's gospel appointed for Francis' feast day, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Francis' faith is a bridge too far. Jesus' words are the sheer grace and promise of God's presence with us precisely in the midst of our struggle. Yet, these expressions are not diametric opposites. Rather, the one informs the other. Francis' wisdom glimpsed Jesus' presence for and with him, allowing him to then empty himself in turn. Jesus' life shaped Francis' life. And our lives as well.

While on the weekly Wednesday zoom call with the bishops of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, one participant was clearly disturbed by the chaos of the presidential debate that took place on Tuesday. Anticipating the soon-to-be with us season, he asked how do we celebrate Christmas in a fascist country. Of course, there are those who will disagree with his assessment. However, the response of bishop Ian Douglas was prescient. Without missing a beat, he responded that that is

the essence of Christmas. God with us. God coming to us in the midst of a fascist state, the fascism of the Roman rule of the first century. God vulnerable and weak. God coming to us amidst the worst that the world can create. God present with us and for us in the oppression of life and the chaos of the world. God continually meeting us in the places that seem god forsaken. Thus, the words of Jesus possess meaning for he speaks not only to the situation in which we find ourselves--weary and carrying heavy burdens--but he promises to be present with us in this place. I will give you rest. . . You will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy. My burden is light.

Thus, faith is not a contest to see who can outperform the other in various acts. Rather, faith emerges from the awareness of the gift of God present to us not in power or strength, but coming to us in simplicity, poverty, and humility. Embracing us so that we may embrace each other. We are all called to embody Christ to the world in the way that we can, where we are, with the gifts that we have been given. No one is greater or lesser. We all have work to do, and we all have been confronted by unconditional love that we might live more fully into that reality. Indeed, the irony of Francis is that for all that he did and the severity of the model of his life of faith, he is reported to have said at the end of his life, "I have done what was mine to do. May

Christ teach you what is yours!” Indeed. May Christ teach you what is yours.