

October 2, 2022
Celebrating the Feast of St. Francis
Job 39:1-18
Psalm 148:7-14
Galatians 6:14-18
Matthew 11:25-30

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

You might have noticed that we're celebrating the Feast of St. Francis today, this being the Sunday closest to his feast day of October 4th. Saint Francis is the patron saint of Italy, but also of animals, which you probably know, and also of ecology. Since the Vatican declared this second one in the 1970s, there has been a very appropriate linking of Francis with creation care. Francis declared that nature was God's mirror, and he called all creatures brother and sister, and even gave those names to the sun and moon. His humility and connection to the true message of Jesus's gospel was remarkable both for his time, and for our time. He actually lived as Jesus called us to live: in humility, poverty, loving all God's creatures, and sharing the gospel. A saying that is attributed to him is "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words."

When we see statues and pictures of St. Francis in his simple brown robe, it's easy to forget that he was born into a very wealthy family in Assisi, probably in 1181. His father was a highly successful cloth merchant, and Francis grew up, by all accounts, very spoiled and rather wild. He was fond of good food, wine, and parties, and he and his friends were often caught breaking the city curfew. Known for being handsome, vain, and charming, he was expected to go into his father's business. But what he really wanted was to be a knight—best of all to be a war hero. He got his chance at this in 1202 when war broke out between Assisi and Perugia, and he joined the cavalry.

Instead of becoming a hero, however, he became a prisoner of war, and because he was richly dressed, and wearing expensive new armor, he was held for ransom—for over a year. That time he spent underground, in the enemy dungeon changed his life forever; first, he became very sick, and he also began having visions from God. When he was finally ransomed home, he returned physically debilitated, probably with some chronic conditions that never really left him. He also had changed his interests completely, spending a lot of time in prayer at local churches, and in taking care of lepers. Then, at the church of San Damiano he heard Christ talking to him from the crucifix there; Jesus told him to rebuild his church, and to live in poverty.

In order to get money to rebuild the church, Francis apparently took a bolt of expensive cloth from his father's warehouse, and sold both it and his own horse. When his father discovered what he'd done, he was outraged, and took Francis before the local bishop, demanding that something be done. The bishop ordered Francis to return the money to his father, which he did—but, on the spot, he also gave his father all of the clothes he was wearing and stated that God was now the only father that he recognized. Apparently, he never spoke to his father again. As you might imagine, there

were a lot of people at the time who thought Francis was a lunatic. But eventually, as he actually lived into the poverty, simplicity and love that he believed Jesus was calling him to, many people began to take him seriously.

What he was preaching, while it was the gospel, was also in conflict with the rich, decadent, powerful medieval Catholic Church. Francis was attractive, and apparently a very charismatic preacher who influenced thousands of people. He was always careful to honor the Church, though, especially priests, because they actually handled the Body of Christ. In following Christ he also venerated the Eucharist. So while what he was living and preaching was flying in the face of the wealthy, worldly Church, he didn't get much unfavorable response from the bishops. Eventually, Francis established his followers as the Franciscan Friars. In 1212, with the help of Clare of Assisi, Francis organized a second order, one for women, that became known as The Poor Clares, in her honor. Together they served the poor and the sick of Italy.

In his life and teachings, Francis tried to make poverty a holy thing. He and his friars worked for everything they needed, rarely begging. But Francis would not allow the friars to take money for their work. Francis said, "If we had any possessions, we should need weapons and laws to defend them." Also, Francis reasoned, someone who owns nothing is truly free. Francis believed in the total denial of self, total humility. In his writings, which are all available online, by the way, it's clear that he believed in what Fr. Richard Rohr calls a "spirituality of imperfection," and gratitude for God's grace. Francis said none of us is worthy of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, but *through* that sacrifice, we all *become* worthy, in all our imperfections. Our worthiness has nothing to do with us, but everything to do with God's goodness and love.

On September 14th, 1224 Francis had a vision of a crucified man who also resembled a seraph, and when the vision was over, Francis himself had the stigmata—the wounds that Jesus had—on his hands, feet, and side. He was largely successful in hiding the stigmata from the public, because he spent a lot of time being quite sick after this incident. However, after his death, his superiors publicized it widely. On October 3, 1225, blind and suffering, but joyful, Francis died in the monastery of San Damiano. Two years later he was canonized as a saint.

Today we can appreciate Francis's dedication to living the very letter of Jesus's way of life. It's also helpful to focus on his teachings of humility and gratitude. As we're hearing so much here at Christ Church lately, we live our best life when we focus on the needs of others. Amen

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis
Rector, Christ Church Millwood