



Saint Francis Day

October 4, 2020: The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Oh God, take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts, and set them on fire. Amen.

Late this summer, as I was looking over the calendar of Sundays for the fall, I was thrilled to see that this year October 4, The Feast of St. Francis, fell on a Sunday. Like many, I'm a big fan of Francis, though I haven't known much about him. In large part, St. Francis Day was an excuse to invite people to church with their pets. And since Anglicans will bless just about anything, pet blessings were the order of the day. And since this year the day falls on a Sunday, it's also reason to order the liturgy around themes that have long been associated with Francis, especially love of creation, simplicity, non-violence, and care for the poor. Our music and lections emphasize this. I can also say that I knew that the current Pope was the first Pope to take Francis as his name, and that in many ways, Pope Francis has emphasized in his papacy aspects of his namesake's ministry—especially care for the poor and for creation.

Otherwise, mostly what I knew were some of the sweet stories about his relationship with animals—his friendship with wolf outside the town of Gubbio, for example. You may know the story—a wolf terrorizes the community. Francis has a stern talk with the wolf and tells him to stop terrorizing the town; and he has a stern talk with the community, telling them that wolf was terrorizing them because the wolf was hungry. Would the town feed the wolf? Would the wolf stop stalking the town? The wolf got fed, and the town and the wolf became friends, and according to legend, the town even grieved when the wolf died.

Or maybe we've heard the dramatic story about how Francis turned his back on the libertine life of a spoiled rich kid, and how he rejected the money and power of his father's lucrative business in luxury textiles—the story goes that he stripped naked in the town square, laying his clothes at the feet of his father, as a symbol of the final and permanent rupture with his family. There is no evidence that he ever spoke to his parents again.

But I felt I needed to take a closer look at Francis' life when I looked at the readings that are appointed for today to commemorate his life. I was expecting something a little bit more “feel good,” something happier, something lighter, than the exhortations of Jeremiah, or Paul's identification of the marks of Jesus branded on his body, or Jesus' words to “take my yoke upon you.” Who were these lections actually pointing to? (I'm grateful to an article from an issue of The New Yorker magazine of January 14, 2013, for orienting me to Francis' life. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/14/rich-man-poor-man>, accessed 2020.10.2)

I wasn't surprised to learn that apart from the Virgin Mary, Francis is the best known and the most honored of Catholic saints. He is especially loved by partisans of lefty causes: the animal-rights movement, feminism, ecology, vegetarianism (though he was not a vegetarian). He is also claimed by Italian nationalists—he is one of the patron saints of Italy, along with Catherine and Bernardino of Siena.

But I was surprised to learn that as a young man, he had been taken prisoner in a war between his hometown of Assisi and Perugia, another Italian hill town to the west. Though apparently he had been keen to ride an excellent steed and wear fine armor, he ended up spending a year in a dank, rat-infested jail cell, before his father paid the ransom to free him. I can imagine that may have put a strain on their relationship.

This was the beginning of his change. When he returned home, his friends noticed that this gregarious and popular *bon vivant* had lost his penchant for parties and light-hearted hi-jinks. He began praying, whole days at a time, in an abandoned church outside Assisi, and then began sleeping there as well. He started to embrace lepers, literally—those outsiders despised by all—and experienced the sweet presence of Christ with those outcasts, whose rejection mimicked the abandonment experienced by Christ himself as he hung on the Cross.

Francis was a complicated man with contradictory impulses. He practiced a harsh and unyielding ascetism, yet easily dispensed pastoral exceptions to apparently rigid rules. For example, he believed in and practiced hair shirts and fasting, but also warned that excessive fasting was harmful to “Brother Body.” His anti-institutional impulse and dedication to absolute poverty threatened the wealth and power of the church, yet his sincere obedience to the Church was rewarded with Papal approval of his new order. By all accounts a gentle, kind man dedicated to peace, yet he also climbed atop a grand edifice being built by the Vatican to house his new order, and ripped off the shingles one by one and threw them at the builders, so opposed was he to any sign of wealth that separated him or his friars from the poor. He used to say, as a matter of fact, that his spouse was Lady Poverty.

I also learned that he never uttered the excellent quote, “Preach the Gospel at all times, when necessary use words.” What he did in fact say was, “*It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.*” *More nuanced, to be sure.*

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/preach-the-gospel-at-all-times-st-francis_b_1627781 (accessed 2020.10.3)

And though he was famous for his disregard for learning, he was, in fact, a riveting preacher. One writer described him as having “a way of making his whole body a tongue.”

The final six years of his life were marked by grave and constant illness—malaria contracted from a trip to Egypt to try to convert the Sultan; trachoma, an intensely painful eye infection; a gastric ulcer, suggested by accounts of him vomiting blood. The medieval medical treatments for these ailments were much worse than the diseases themselves—I’ll spare you the description of those.

In the final year of his life, he experienced particularly great suffering. During this time, there appeared on his body marks that mirrored the wounds of Christ on the cross—the stigmata, as they are called: blackened protuberances on his hands, feet, and a gash on his side. And it was also in this final year that he composed what is likely the first poem ever written in Italian: the Canticle of Sun. Even while wracked with pain, he celebrates in this poem his kinship with God’s creation: Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Mother Earth, and finally, Sister Death.



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And so, as I read about his life—our Scripture passages began to make much more sense.

His commitment to caring for the poor is echoed in Jeremiah's exhortation: those who do justice and righteousness and judge the cause of poor and needy—those who do these things will know the Lord;

Or his experience of all the living things of the earth actively praising the Creator who created them, is seen in the Psalm;

His bodily, somatic identification with the gruesome marks of Jesus' final suffering on the Cross, this aligns with Paul's own physical suffering for the Gospel, to which Paul refers in his letter to the Galatians;

And finally, his holy foolishness—his rejection of worldly wisdom and power and material things; his whole-hearted embrace of the weak and the poor; the way his life and ministry made the burden lighter for all those he served—is described in the Gospel.

Francis' love for the created order meshes with the urgency of our own age to pay attention to how we humans are contributing to the rising fever of our planet—if the raging fires, intensifying weather events, melting glaciers and ice sheets, rising sea levels, and wildly fluctuating climate conditions aren't enough.

This edgier, darker, more complex side of Francis was new to me. The depth and cost of his discipleship makes him more real, and the life of ministry that he stood for, and practiced, and toward which he points us, makes him more compelling.

On this glorious New England fall day—we can give heartfelt thanks for the inspirational beauty of the world around us that God has given. We join Francis in this. At Christ Church we can give thanks for our array of solar panels - taking advantage of the kindness of Brother Sun—which not only save us thousands of dollars in electric bills each year, but also reduce our carbon footprint. We have a smart thermostat in the Upper Parish Hall and use cleaner burning natural gas to heat our physical plant. Are there more ways we can continue to honor Mother Earth, as Francis dubbed our fragile, island home? I remind us that our revised Baptismal Covenant approved by the National Church includes this final promise, which is new in the last couple of years: "Will you cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation?" And the response is, "I will, with God's help."

Are there ways we can more effectively and more generously minister with the poor? Our Baptismal Covenant asks: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

With Francis as our companion, our witness, and our inspiration, we can say, I will, with God's help.

Amen.