

St. Francis B
Galatians 6:14-18; Matthew 11:25-30

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Problem in the Text

Today we celebrate one of the most beloved saints of all – St. Francis of Assisi. You will most often find St. Francis in gardens, a sweet statue near a birdbath, birds and animals such as squirrel and deer at his feet. At least that is how I first knew him as a little girl. My father gave my mother an impossibly sweet statue of Francis in brown robes, with a speckled fawn curled up at his feet and a blue bird in his hand. Somehow the Italian garden statue crafter managed to make that bald tonsure and the circle of brown hair look like a fetching fashion statement on the handsome Italian Francis. Francis became known for his care for creation because of a few legends that he had preached to the birds and had tamed a wild wolf. The legend reports that a wolf had been menacing a village, killing flocks and dogs and eating men. Francis marched up into the woods and made a pact with the wild wolf. “Because the wolf had “done evil out of hunger, the townsfolk were to feed the wolf regularly. In return, the wolf would no longer prey upon them or their flocks. In this manner the town was freed from the menace of the predator. Francis even made a pact on behalf of the town dogs, that they would not bother the wolf again. Finally, to show the townspeople that they would not be harmed, Francis blessed the wolf.”¹

Pope John Paul II “wrote on the occasion of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, the saint of Assisi “offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation...” He went on to make the point that: “As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Saint Francis invited all of creation – animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon – to give honor and praise to the Lord.”² Interest in the life of St. Francis has picked up again. Archbishop and Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina took the name “Francis” as a declaration of his hopes for his particular witness to the Gospel in his papacy. Bergoglio had previously expressed his admiration for St. Francis, explaining that “He brought to Christianity an idea of poverty against the luxury, pride, vanity of the civil and ecclesiastical powers of the time. He changed history.” Pope Francis has delighted the world with his concern for the poor, his refusal to take on the regal trappings of his office, and his advocacy for the environment.

But there is something more about St. Francis than the sweetness of communing with nature and caring for the poor. I think the Pope has a more radical Francis in mind: the Francis who found in nearness to God a radical relationship which changed him from a spoiled rich kid to a man who lived in radical humility and poverty, a man who called himself, “simplex et idiota,” simple and ignorant. The readings chosen for Francis’ saint day crack this mystery open for us – what it means to live as Paul put it in his letter to the Galatians, to never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14.) The gospel passage chosen for St. Francis is from Matthew and begins, “Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will” (11:25-26.) These passages led St. Francis into a radical understanding of his existence in the face of God – and that led to his radical life of poverty and identification with creation and the poor. He felt like an infant, like one newly created when he contemplated the greatness, the eternity, and the infinite power of his Creator. He felt the humiliation and the great love of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. Young Francis stood before his father, the bishop of Assisi, and the town tribunal and took off his clothes, renounced his former life and took on the life of a beggar, wandering the region around Assisi in rough cloth, and helping to rebuild run-down chapels in exchange for meals and shelter. Men and women began to follow his example, and soon Francis wrote a rule of life for a new order devoted to radical humility and service.

¹ Bonaventure (1867), pp. 78–85, as found in Wikipedia entry on St. Francis.

² Pope John Paul II, “World Day of Peace 1990”.

Problem in the World

As we contemplate what such a life of self-sacrifice like St. Francis' in response to Christ's sacrifice for humanity and for creation on the cross, I hate to throw ice-cold water on us but there has been a lot of awful going on in the world these past few weeks. The cycle of wars, shootings, violence, and injustice fills the news cycle and the papers. What are we in relation to such an inevitable tide in the world? The burden of the brokenness of this world weighs upon us, wears us down. How could an example such as Francis possibly make a dent in the problems that face the modern world? What model is a life of radical humility in response to deeply personal trauma? "My child is suffering," "I have just been diagnosed with cancer," or "I can't make my rent this month" don't seem to be connected to a statue of a saint with a bird on his shoulder who called himself ignorant and an idiot.

Grace in the Text

I think the answer lies in the words of Christ that meant so much to Francis as found in Matthew's Gospel, "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" (Matt. 11:29-30.) The "yoke" of Christ is taking on a radically relational understanding of who God is as Creator and as Redeemer. In Christ, through his work on the cross, we are constantly newly-created beings, constantly forgiven and redeemed.

The nature of our very being is linked to the nature of God in every moment of our lives.

Francis' understanding of the Gospel, the Good News, is that it is not about a past event but about what Christ is proclaiming in the present moment to each of us and to all of creation. Francis' existential drumbeat is "God is THAT great." Because God is THAT great, Francis found he was free to be gentle and humble in heart, like Christ. With his heavy burdens laid down, Francis was able to be like Christ, present to love whomever or whatever God placed before him. Francis felt like he was in integral part of the love found in the whole of God's creation. That is a radical kind of love that is free to be fully focused on the beloved. It has no concern for the self – only the other.

Grace in the World

If we can tap into that depth and greatness of God's love, what does that mean for our world and for our community? I do not think we all necessarily need to drop our clothing and wear rough cloth robes. But that is a call for some who join the Order of St. Francis. The brown robes have become an outward sign of the poverty and humility of St. Francis which his brothers continue to embody in the world – a particular witness to God's radical love. As a community in Northern Virginia, a presence in our corner of the world, Grace Church can take on the figurative brown robes of Francis, a mantle of humility for the redemption we find in Christ. With our heavy burdens of sin and brokenness laid down, we are free to join in the outpouring of love for others and for creation. Pope John Paul II said, "The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples."

When you choose to become a member at Grace Church, you are really accepting an invitation to join us as a community representing the love of Christ in the world. We learn in community about the witness of the Gospel and the witness of the saints who have come before us about how the love of Christ transforms us into the newly created, into something larger than what the world would have us be. Together in Christ's name we are able to pray for one another, care for one another feed the poor, care for the suffering, and lift up the down-trodden. We can live together in that radical relationship with God that Francis demonstrated in his life, free to love because God is that great.

Amen.