

St. Francis Day Celebration
October 1, 2017
St. John's Cathedral

St. Francis watches over my garden day and night – at least St. Francis in the form of a statue. Sometimes birds rest on his shoulders or his head. Last winter the snow came all the way up to his chin. But he is always there, offering me both comfort and challenge. He offers the comfort of a compassionate saint, and the challenge of a passionate one. The comfort of a man who was kind to the poor, and the challenge of one who adopted poverty as a life choice for himself and his community. A man who was larger than life – larger than any statue could contain.

Francis, who lived in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, was a rich kid who came from a wealthy family of cloth merchants. As a young man, he tried his hand at being a soldier, but that all changed one day in the church of San Damiano, where he heard Jesus saying, “Francis, repair my falling house” – or, as it is sometimes described, “rebuild my Church.”

He heard that quite literally and made plans to repair the church building. You and I might see this kind of challenge as an invitation to have a fundraiser – a raffle or a bake sale. Francis, though, simply sold a bale of silk from his father's warehouse to finance his plan. His father was not pleased, and promptly disowned Francis. Then Francis went a radical new direction.

Francis, in the power of this religious awakening, renounced his material possessions – all of his stuff, all of his wealth -- and devoted himself to serving the poor. He was ‘wedded,’ he said to poverty.

In a sense, Francis was outrageous and radical, both in his own time and in ours. He was probably not an easy man to live with. He scrounged through the garbage for food scraps or did day labor in exchange for bread, milk or vegetables. He embraced the some of the most ostracized and neglected people of his time – lepers , and bathed their sores. He undertook repairing the church by collecting the stones himself in fields.

As challenging as his behavior seemed, a few companions gathered around him and joined in his work, ready to embrace poverty and serve the gospel. By the year 1210 the community had grown and the Pope authorized the formation of a religious order – Friars Minor, the people we now know as Franciscans. Their job was simply to preach. Preach the gospel, as it is sometimes said, with or without words. Their lives and their preaching had to line up. They had no money or property, individually or communally. They were a band of wandering radicals serving Jesus and ministering to the poor.

This was a timely movement. The church needed reform. Many of its clergy were poorly educated and some lived in the lap of luxury, not really focused on the people they were to serve. Francis was a breath of fresh air, and also a challenging figure to many. It was, in a sense, an answer to that call to repair the Church, but not through bricks and mortar. It was a call to re-shape its values and its way of ministering.

The stories about Francis abound. As story tellers are fond of saying, all stories are true and some of them actually happened-- and I think this would hold true for the stories about Francis. Francis had a deep love and intimacy for

everything created by God – everything on earth. Creation for him was a sacrament – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. The earth and all that inhabited it were part of his family as well as brother sun and sister moon.

Years ago I inherited a small book of these stories from Dean Coombs when he retired. Stories like Francis and the Wolf of Gubio, a fierce wolf who devoured animals and humans. Everyone was afraid of this ferocious animal. The wolf snarled at Francis, but Francis made the sign of the cross, called him brother wolf and commanded him to do no further harm. The wolf, it is said, spent the next two years as a very sociable wolf, going in and out of people's houses in Gubio like any other afternoon visitor, and then died of old age.

That wolf was not the only animal who was in Francis' circle of friends. Francis often talked to the birds and animals, loved them, sometimes preached to them (as I guess I am also doing this morning).

There are even more stories about his encounters with all sorts of people, each of which reveals something about his devotion, compassion and passion for the life he lived.

Those stories all reveal something of the spirit of St. Francis – the amazing energy and counter-cultural zeal that he shared. It is no wonder that he has been a beloved saint for centuries.

But I think the question for today is what we take from this incredible and humble man whose life has impacted the church for hundreds of years. How do we continue to live in the spirit of what we have learned from St. Francis?

Three ways come to mind. First, we continue to build the church, but not in the way that Francis first thought he was being called to build. This isn't about bricks and mortar.

Like Francis, we know that we live our faith most effectively when we are intentional and focused – know what we are here for. We are here, like Francis and his companions, to live the gospel. To be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. To live in compassion and generosity and clarity.

In our diocese, we have joined with other Episcopal churches to ask continually, how we become a compelling witness for Jesus Christ? Our theme for the upcoming convention is “following Jesus.” That's very ‘churchy’ language. We don't use that kind of language all the time, but it really helps us to remember that when we welcome the stranger, visit the sick, comfort the sorrowful, extend generosity to those who need it, we are part of that witness. That is how we truly build a church.

Francis' also challenges us about wealth. His embrace of poverty was extreme – radical. But it was his call and his message. He might well say to us, “You have way too much stuff!”

Francis' call to poverty calls us to look at ourselves. Years ago when I was a reader for the General Ordination Exam, one of the questions was to name the most pressing question of our time. One student said that question was, “How will we share?” And then wrote an essay about how that question impacts the world. I've never forgotten that question because it gets to much of what St. Francis was about as he went about preaching, living in poverty and loving the poor.

I'd guess that if Francis had his way, our world would be better at sharing than we are today. When we're honest about ourselves, we have to admit that much of the conflict in our world is over who controls natural resources, food supplies, land -- the things that were created for us to share. Maybe St. Francis becomes our conscience from time to time. He might ask, "How much is enough?"

And finally in the spirit of St. Francis, we love and respect the earth and all of its creatures. That's one of the reasons that we set aside a Sunday to bless our pets. They are a valued part of creation who have found their home with us and they bless us every day.

But beyond that, St. Francis' love for creation informs our love and care for creation – for an earth that sometimes seems in peril from our misuse of its resources. In one of our Eucharistic prayers we remember “this fragile earth, our island home.” And fragile it is. St. Francis calls us to respect and honor that earth that we inhabit. To be good stewards of our land and water and air.

St. Francis continues to watch over my garden – a backyard icon of a gentle and sometimes eccentric saint who brings us both comfort and challenge: to live in Christ's love, to share generously – even sacrificially, and to care for the earth with every fiber of our being. Amen