The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Feast of St. Francis
Isaiah5:1-7, Psalm 80:7-14
Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:23-32

Telling Francis Stories

Of all the people that are remembered in the calendar of the saints, Francis ranks high as one of the most recognized, and one of the most popular. Cities are named after him, his likeness looks out at us from countless pieces of religious art, his statue adorns birdbaths, gardens, and homes throughout the world. He has inspired devotions and drawn countless faithful into the religious orders he founded, and his life has influenced the secular world as well, with plays, songs, and movies made about his life. There is something about him and his wholehearted love for all of creation that people long for, whether they are seekers, long-time disciples, or people who may be indifferent to religion.

And yet, St. Francis of Assisi was so much more than the nature-loving saint who blessed animals and lived close to the earth. He was a man who revitalized the Church of his time, brought faith and religions practice wonderfully alive for people down through the ages, and challenged people to radically live out the Gospel of God's

unconditional love. I would like us to learn a bit more about his life and times today. I would like to tell some Francis stories!

Francis was born in 1181 in Assisi to a wealthy family. His father was a prosperous cloth merchant who owned all kinds of land in the Assisi area. When Francis was growing up, he did not take religious practice seriously. He also knew from a young age that he did not want to join his father in the family business! He spent a lot of his youth living a life of revelry with his friends and dreaming of the fulfillments of chivalry and courtly love, as well as acts of valor on the field of battle. Many an evening you could find Francis and his band of friends living the life of troubadours in the streets of Assisi, singing of the romantic life they dreamed of.

Filled with restless energy, the young Francis decided that he wanted to be a knight and seek glory on the battlefield. His chance came in the year 1200, when Assisi was at war with the neighboring Perugia. Here, he experienced the horrors and dehumanization of violence and was imprisoned. When he was released, he was sick in heart and soul, and that is when he became aware of the still small voice of God that

was trying to get his attention. As he came from wealth and ease, he had an aversion to disease, and lepers were particularly repugnant to him. It is said he was on his horse and rode by a group of them one day, and wanted to draw back, but something led him not only to acknowledge them but to actually kiss and embrace them! This was the beginning of his metanoia, his turning to God.

Wealth and the pursuit of it never really absorbed his mind and his heart, and now he totally detached himself from it. He spent time in prayer, in helping lepers and serving the poor. He sensed God speaking in his heart and asking him to rebuild God's church, which at the time was struggling with corruption, political entanglement and intrigue, and lukewarm faith. He took this literally, and began to rebuild a church at San Damiano, that was in ruins. He took some of his father's cloth and sold it and gave the money to the poor, which so infuriated his father, Pietro Bernardone, that he brought him before the bishop. And there, in the public square, Francis took the step from which there was no turning back. He stripped himself of his clothes and threw them down in front of his father, and claimed that from now on, only God was his father.

He lived the life of an itinerant preacher, living in reliance on his faith in God and the charity that was provided to him, and shared the wonderful news of God's care and grace, and of the joy that was to be found in relying on God alone. He went on to found an order for women and men religious who vowed to live simply, to share things in common with their brothers and sisters, and to share the good news of the salvation of Christ in the family of God. These orders are active in the Church in our own day, and there are Episcopal orders of Franciscan brothers and sisters all over the world.

What can we learn today, from the life of this man who lived in Italy in the Middle Ages, 800 years ago? There are so many things. Today, I would like us to reflect on his contagious joy, his curiosity and humility, and his willingness to take up the cross and follow.

When Francis turned from his carefree, somewhat frivolous life, he didn't lose the joy and sense of celebration that were part of him even then. He was still himself and became even more fully so. The one who sang of wine, song, and courtly love was now the troubadour of the wonderful love of God, the grace, the joy, of wholeheartedly following

Jesus! There were stories of him preaching delightedly to the birds of the air and the creatures of the earth, and of him twirling around delightedly in the winter snowfall, mindless of the bitter cold. When he died it is said that he asked his brothers and sisters to lay him down on the good earth that God had made, that he loved, so he might return to where he came from. Deep joy like this doesn't depend on our outward circumstances, which are fickle and can change just like that. Joy comes from knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and that we are his beloved, and that we walk among God's beloved people.

Francis lived humbly. He didn't think that he had all the answers. He didn't try to force Christian faith on anyone. In 1219, during the fifth Crusade, he crossed enemy lines to have a dialogue with the Sultan Malik al Kamil. He was originally imprisoned and then brought to the Sultan. He shared the story of his faith and respectfully listened to the Sultan share what his Muslim faith meant to him. Francis did not try to convert him but engaged in a dialogue that was life-giving for both of them. The Sultan did not convert to Christianity, but he later spoke of the great respect he had for Francis. Francis, for his part, respected the

holy, the image of God in the Sultan, and that was his starting place for dialogue. He understood that it is God's grace that touches hearts, in God's way and in God's time. Francis was deeply rooted in who he was as a follower of Jesus, and was able to be curious about others, respecting their experience. This is particularly important in today's world, where we divide ourselves into camps of us and them, enemy and friend, believer and infidel. I pray that as a church, as a nation, as a people, we can have the humility to realize we cannot begin to understand the mystery of God, and that it can show itself through people of all faiths, and even those with no allegiance to religion at all. I pray we can show the hospitality of Jesus, who taught us to love our enemies, to those who we feel are across an unbridgeable chasm, that we trust that with God's grace, we can find common ground.

Finally, Francis was willing to walk the way of the Cross and find in it the way of joy and peace. Later in his life, it is said that after a vision in a cave in Laverna, he received the marks of the stigmata, or the wounds of Christ, in his hands, feet, and side. He spent the rest of his life trying to hide them. He found great joy in contemplating Christ's love

that caused him to willingly suffer and die that the world would forever be freed from the scourge of sin and death. In today's lesson from Paul's letter to the Philippians, the apostle writes: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Francis loved his Lord so much that it brought him joy to pour himself out in love for the world, just as Jesus had done for him. Walking in the way of the cross was the joy of his existence, his reason for living. While most of us won't experience visions or the physical wounds of the stigmata, we too can joyfully take up the cross, to have the love shown there engraved upon our hearts. We can walk the way of vulnerable, abundant love, love that can transform sorrow to joy, fear to faith, despair to hope, and cause enmity to fall away, so that we can truly see each other as children of the one God. This way of living can bring true hope, true possibilities of living in peace, one with the other.

I would like to conclude with the final verse of the Canticle of the Sun, a song of praise composed by St. Francis when he was near death: Most high, omnipotent, good Lord, to thee be ceaseless praise

outpoured, and blessing without measure. Let creatures all give thanks to thee and serve thee in great humility. Let it be so. Amen.