

The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi
Re-dedication of Worship Space – St. Francis Church, September 29/30, 2007
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Most of you have seen the familiar statue of St. Francis—there is one outside in the Memorial Garden and back when we began the capital campaign in May one appeared in the narthex to watch over us in this process. I know many of you have St. Francis (or “Frank” as I prefer to call him) in your gardens, as we do at the rectory. He is pleasant enough; often some birds are there with him or some animal is sitting at his feet. But I want to go back today and reintroduce you to Francis, the person—before he got to be a saint and a statue. I want to try to tell his story in a way that maybe helps us to see him in context, and in so doing to see if there is anything in his life that can help us to be lights in our own generation. For some of you what I have to say may be old news, but I suspect (and hope) that at least some of what I have to say will be new to many of you. *

We have to travel back to the latter days of the twelfth century...back to the Umbrian town of Assisi, half-way between Rome and Florence. I drove there this summer in a little Fiat, from Siena—a lovely drive through the hills of Tuscany and into Umbria. Assisi sits on a hill and it’s obvious the roads were built long before the automobile: you park at the bottom of the hill and walk up. In many ways as you walk the narrow streets it does feel like you are going back in time and one can almost imagine walking into good old Francis...no longer a statue but a real person in a real time and place.

If you have ever been to some of the great medieval universities—the University of Paris, the University of Siena, Oxford and Cambridge—then you know what it is like to feel surrounded by history. Keep in mind that all of these great centers of learning were founded during Francis’ lifetime; he lived at a time the idea of a university was a new concept.

In 1182, an infant boy was baptized in the cathedral font of Assisi. His mother was a religious person and so she decided to name her son after John the Baptist, the one who “prepared the way” for Jesus. And so he was christened “Giovanni.” At the latter part of the twelfth century, Assisi was moving from a feudal society to a mercantile society. That led to clashes between social classes: the old guard and the “nouveau riche” merchants like Giovanni’s father, a cloth trader who traveled regularly on business to France. That is how Giovanni got his nickname, by the way: Francesco, or “little Frenchman”—because of his dad’s love for all things French. Francesco probably traveled with his dad on business trips in his teenage years; if he got to Paris he would have seen a new cathedral being built there that would be named for the mother of our Lord, Notre Dame.

By all accounts, Francesco was a spoiled rich kid. It can happen when parents are upwardly mobile, and yet not necessarily accepted by the old aristocracy. They can indulge their children in ways that are not always helpful. Francesco grew up in a very privileged home, and no doubt his father expected him to follow in his path in the family business. Something happened, though—it’s not clear what—that led to a change in Francesco’s worldview. Some say he came down with an illness that left him bedridden for a long period of time. He ended up in the military, wanting to become a knight.

When someone says “*semper fi*” to you, you know that they are shaped by a whole set of values that make that person a marine. Well knights in the Middle Ages were something like that, and the equivalent of “*semper fi*” was the notion of chivalry. Two “core values” for a knight were a commitment to *largesse*, i.e. to give freely, and to be always courteous. It’s worth noting that because as profoundly shaped as Francesco would be by the gospel, these military values also played a role in shaping who he was becoming, and in fact dove-tailed with his reading of the gospel. Generosity and courtesy permeate the Rule of Francis: obviously those are gospel values but its worth noticing that they were also integral to his training as a knight.

Francis had a powerful religious awakening in the church in San Damiano. While praying, he heard Christ calling to him from the crucifix that we had front and center while in Fellowship Hall, the crucifix that has returned to its home in the back of the nave: “Francesco, rebuild my church.” Some might call it a “conversion experience” but I think it is more accurate to call experiences like this “awakenings” because it reminds us that it’s about what God was doing in his life, not the other way around. That is to say, at that cathedral font he was “claimed and sealed and marked as Christ’s own forever.” It isn’t God’s fault he was asleep to that reality for so many years.

So as Francesco began to finally “wake up” he began to rebuild the church in San Damiano, as well as the little chapel down in the valley called *Partiuncula*—or “little portion.” (The name we’ve borrowed here at St. Francis for our monthly newsletter.) The moment of ultimate conflict in Francesco’s life came when his father called in the bishop, a personal friend, to talk some sense into the boy who was beginning to take his faith too seriously. Part of what was happening is that he was being very generous with his father’s hard-earned money.

I got to stand in the upper church in Assisi in front of the fresco that is reproduced today on your bulletins, and tried to imagine the turmoil and the sense of shame and betrayal that both father and son must have felt that day in the public square as Francesco went, shall we say, “al fresco.”

I want us to try to see the humanity in that scene, long before Francis became a statue in the garden. Even if he is canonized, I think we make a mistake if we turn Francis into the hero of this moment and his father into the devil. I imagine his dad, especially within his context of a changing world where there were increasing opportunities for those willing to work hard, as honestly wanting the very best for his son. The problem is that father and son don’t see eye-to-eye on what is best. Their core values clash and Francis has to live the life he believes God is calling him to, not his father’s dreams.

I wonder if it isn’t a kind of inverted story of the prodigal son: instead of the father running out to embrace the son, Francesco’s father seems almost to be recoiling. Who is this kid and what has happened to him? With all due respect to Francis, as a parent I can’t help but feel some empathy for the father. That isn’t the same as saying he was right: we raise our kids in order to let them become adults who will find their own path to God and their own way in the world. But moments like this one are so hard—not just for father and son (and the bishop) but for all the rest of us who are eavesdropping on a family matter being played out in the town square. It’s a sad and heart-wrenching moment—at least to me it is, even if it is also a defining moment in Francis’ spiritual journey.

So we get this very public rift in a small town. For Francis, at the heart of the gospel was a call to embrace poverty as a way to share in Christ's suffering. His father simply couldn't understand that after all the sacrifices he had made to make life better for his son. And so father and son go their separate ways.

In 1219, Francis heads off to the Middle East during the time of the Crusades. War is always hell, but the Crusades were particularly brutal (as perhaps only religious conflicts are.) Yet Francis goes down to Egypt to the sultan's palace to meet with a caliph who is roughly the same age as he is—late thirties. The Muslim leader, most likely a Sufi mystic, is fond of religious poetry, intellectually curious, and on good terms with the merchants of Venice. The two men meet and Francis tries to convert him to Christianity. That doesn't happen, but they depart in peace and on good terms.

It is another episode in Francis' life worth pondering: in the heart of the Islamic world, in the middle of the Crusades, bearing witness to the love of God he knew in Jesus. The word *Crusader* literally means "he who bears the cross." In the twelfth century and to this very day, however, that word sends chills down the spines of people who remember the atrocities done in the name of Christ and in the name of the cross. Language is so easily manipulated in times of war. Yet Francis bore witness in the midst of all of that to another way. For him the "way of the cross" meant the way of mutual respect and conversation, being an instrument of peace in a world gone mad, living with hope for the dawn of a new day. In that sense he was the true Crusader of his time and place.

So what can we learn then from the way our patron lived out his faith? Like Francis at San Damiano and The Little Portion, we have been busy over the course of these past several months "re-building the Church," tending to much-needed repairs like painting and roofing and refinishing pews. These repairs help us to do the work God has called us to do. We made them not for ourselves but because of our abiding trust in the future. We were inheritors of the faithfulness of those who founded this parish more than fifty years ago and now we are trying to be faithful to those who will come after us. There is still work to be done; the truth is that there is always work to be done. As we pay down our debt (and those green envelopes continue to come in) we will continue to do work in the Memorial Garden and at St. Clare House and in the rest of this building. But today we pause to rededicate this space and to *rejoice* for all that has happened to *refresh* and *renew* us.

For us (as for Francis) the work of ministry includes making repairs to buildings but that's the beginning, not the end. What lessons does a man who lived nine hundred years ago have to teach us as twenty-first Christians? We care for the environment—for this earth our fragile island home—because being stewards of God's good gifts is at the heart of the gospel as Francis knew it. We love the animals, our sisters and brothers (even when they make us wheeze and sneeze) and so we bless them this afternoon. But above all, it seems to me that we are called to be Crusaders in the truest and most original meaning of that word: to bear the cross. Not to wield it as a weapon of power, but to carry it as a sign of weakness and grace. With Francis (and with St. Paul before him) we dare to say together: "may we never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Galatians 6:14)

We have an opportunity in El Salvador to be cross-bearers—to stand with the poor. I have to tell you that when it was first suggested that this parish give away one tenth of what we raised for

our capital improvements—\$30,000, not one person on the vestry blinked. It was a proud moment for me to be reminded yet again of how blessed I am to serve a parish that really gets it. The hurt and pain that have been normative for so long in that part of the world goes back a long way, and it seems to me that any honest assessment of our foreign policy over the past fifty years would have to acknowledge that we have not been instruments of peace in Central America. But in the face of all that, we dare to bear the cross as a way toward new life, toward Easter hope. So we prepare to greet strangers as *amigos*, and to walk together as *hermanos y hermanas*.

Like Francis we are willing to travel to distant places in order to be instruments of peace and agents of reconciliation. But like Francis, we do well to remember that sometimes it can be harder to reach across the kitchen table than across the world. Sometimes the work of reconciliation that is needed most is the work of healing the rifts that emerge between father and son, or mother and daughter, or brother and sister. Over the past four years or so, the Episcopal Church has experienced deep division and pain nationally, within our diocese, and right here at St. Francis. People of deep faith and of good conscience have left us in search of places where they might feel affirmed in their commitments. Always for me, those departures were painful. It seems to me, though, that this parish has been faithful through it all as we have tried to keep room for all points-of-view at the Table. No one has been “ex-communicated.” All are welcome here.

Not everyone here agrees, anymore than Francis and his father could agree on all things. But what I have learned personally over the past four years or so (and I think we have learned together as a parish) is what it means to not just *pray* the Prayer of St. Francis but to *live* it—with God’s help. In a world where there is so much hatred and injury and discord and doubt and despair and darkness and sadness we have our work cut out for us. It is easy to get sucked into all of that. But our work is clear: as bearers of the cross we are called to be Crusaders for love and pardon and union and faith and hope and light and joy.

I believe that at the heavenly banquet, Francis and his father have bridged the chasm that divided them in this world. And that it matters less in God’s presence who is right and who is wrong than that we are all broken, and all loved, more deeply than we can possibly imagine. In God’s presence, I believe the fatted calf is killed once more and the table is set, and father and son embrace, and all is forgiven. If that makes any sense at all to you, then I pray that we rededicate not only our worship space today but ourselves—to our mission and to our vision, which will give us plenty of work to keep us busy for many years to come.

* I am especially indebted in this sermon to Lawrence S. Cunningham’s biography, *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (Wm Eerdmann’s, 2004)