

This weekend we celebrate our patronal feast at all three services. Now that is a mouthful, especially if you happened to grow up a Methodist or a Congregationalist! But all it means is this: our namesake and *patron* saint, Francis of Assisi, died on this weekend in 1226. Usually we remember the saints at our mid-week service on Wednesday nights, but most parishes take some time each year to step back from the normal lectionary to focus on their namesake. So Saint Matthew’s Church celebrated their patronal feast a couple of weeks ago on September 21, and All Saints Church will celebrate their patronal feast day next month, on November 1, All Saints’ Day.

Fifty-six years ago this week, this congregation was organized as a formal mission of our diocese by St. John’s in Worcester—then located on Lincoln Street. There are many different stories about how we ended up being named for St. Francis and I believe all of them! This afternoon, as has been our practice for many decades, we’ll remember Francis with a service of Blessing of the Animals for all creatures great and small, our sisters and brothers from the animal world.

Twenty-four years ago, Bishop Andrew Wissemann came here to celebrate the Feast of St. Francis with us and to consecrate the Memorial Garden. And (can you believe it?) it is just one year ago, on this very same weekend, that we re-dedicated our worship space after undergoing renovations.

It has become our custom here for more than a decade now to commission each year’s confirmation class on this weekend. Today they begin a year-long process with their chosen mentors immediately following the service. That process will culminate in May when the Bishop comes for his annual visit and they are confirmed. We also remember the saints who are interred in that Garden on this weekend, and weather permitting, step outside at the end of worship to do that. This year, however, is an even more special opportunity for us: not only to remember those saints, but to give thanks for the work that has been done this summer in the Garden and to re-dedicate it as a place of prayer and meditation. So it’s a busy weekend!

Now for most people who have been hanging around here for a while, there are a few things you probably already know about our dear friend, Francis. He was actually baptized Giovanni, after John the Baptist. But his father loved all things French and so called him Francesco—“little Frenchman.” I like to call him “Frank.” We know him as a person who prayed that he might be an instrument of God’s peace; as a person who chose poverty as a way to more closely identify with Christ. We know him as a statue who likes to hang out in our gardens with birds all around him: it’s a way of remembering his love for planet earth and his habit of preaching to the birds. (I identify with Frank in that area, because we have a few “birds” around here as well.) Probably many of you know that bumper sticker theology attributed to him about “preaching the gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.” The statement on today’s bulletin, which may be slightly less familiar, expresses the same sentiment: basically he’s a person who “walked the talk.”

But there is another episode in Frank’s life as a young man that I want to speak of today. Before I do that I want to call your attention to the fifth commandment, however, that we heard in today’s Old Testament reading from Exodus: the one about honoring your parents. That seems pretty straightforward, doesn’t it? My father might say, in some circumstances, that it meant “I

don’t want to hear any of your lip.” Others might say to their children: “don’t embarrass me.” Cultural expectations change and parents and kids may disagree on where the line is but most of us have a pretty good sense of when it has been crossed.

But here is the thing: our patron, Frank, stands out in the public square in Assisi and takes all of his clothes off and with all the neighbors gathered around, he tells his father that he wants nothing to do with him anymore. He tells him where he can stick all his money and that he wants nothing to do with the family business. He says the only father he has is God. That’s pretty raw and emotional stuff. I remember standing just fifteen months ago looking at a fresco in the upper church in Assisi depicting this event in Frank’s life. It remains a powerful image for me.

Here is my question: does Frank violate the commandment to honor his father by putting on this very public display? Maybe more directly: are we encouraging *our* kids to embarrass *us* by claiming him as our patron saint? Would it be better to find a parish named for a nicer saint like John or Luke?

While none of us are ever in a position to confess other people’s sins it should not surprise us to learn that those we call saints are also sinners in need of God’s forgiveness and healing love. While children are commanded to honor their parents, parents are called to love their children. But love is a risky business, and the process of letting go is never easy. It’s hard because sometimes it’s difficult to know where we end and they begin, and I suspect that is even harder for moms than for dads—who after all can literally remember the time when that son or daughter was physically a part of their own body. The process of separating can be painful—because it’s hard when we love someone to remember that they are not really “ours”—even if they do have our eyes or nose, or our passion for music or our skill in hitting a baseball. They belong first and always to God, which I think is the whole point of the Sacrament of Baptism. We give them back to God—we give them a community of faith, an extended family that is bigger than the people who live in our homes. If I want my kid to follow in my footsteps, to go to my college or choose my career or marry the person of my choosing, that is not, in the end, love; it’s a form of narcissism.

So parents surely do deserve to be treated with honor and respect and I doubt anyone here would challenge that premise. But the hard calls in life come when we feel stifled or trapped by our parents, when love smothers rather than frees us. The hard challenges are what to do when we reach a certain age and need to be allowed to become adults—to make our own choices and even our own mistakes, but our parents cannot let go. How do we get out from under all of that? It seems to me that is the predicament that Frank was in. He felt called to his own life—to follow his own path and his father apparently couldn’t let go. And so this terrible embarrassing moment on the town square in Assisi for all the neighbors to leer at.

I have a little plaque in my office which was given to me by the director of the pre-school at Christ and Holy Trinity Church in Westport, CT, where I served as Associate Rector in the mid 1990s. Both of my kids attended that pre-school. It says: “there are two things you give to your children: roots and wings.” Hardly a day goes by that I don’t look at that plaque. But I am increasingly aware (as my kids begin to soar) that while I agree with that sentiment it is descriptive, not prescriptive—it didn’t come with a manual. I don’t know what that the magic

age is but I know that being a parent doesn't stop when your kid reaches a certain birthday or goes off to college or even gets married and has her own kids. Being a parent is forever. And yet there is this process of letting go as well.

There is a part of me that wishes Frank would have sat down with his parents and talked it out, and told them he wished to start a monastic community. That he would have kept this *private*, so as not to embarrass his father in *public*. And maybe he tried that a hundred times and the old man just couldn't hear it. At the other end, I find myself wondering if they ever reconciled later in life and it bothers me that I've never been able to find anything out about that. Did Frank himself ever have regrets about the way he handled that day in the public square? I'll never probably find answers to these questions but they haunt me each fall. Sometimes I sit and think about both Frank and his poor old father, locked in that power struggle, airing their dirty laundry in public; Frank shaming, not honoring, the father who tried to raise him to be a good person with good middle-class values.

And yet, after all these years of getting to know him almost as a friend and preaching his life-story for more than a decade now, I also realize that this is the part of it I continue to feel most drawn to, which I'm sure makes me really strange. But maybe I like it because it is messy because for all of its pathos it is so *real*. In that moment in the town square he is certainly no statue! Maybe it's because I haven't yet learned to talk to a wolf or preach to a bird (and I'm not even always that keen about blessing a cat!) It isn't always clear to me how best to be an instrument of peace in a warring world or how to sow love where there is hatred.

Yet in that moment when Frank takes his clothes off and stands naked before the world; in his vulnerability and pain that I see him as someone who not only embodies the gospel but who needed God's grace and love every bit as much as you or I do. I don't know if my words today convey what I mean to say, but let me try it this way. It's easy to make the saints into something they never were. We've learned that Mother Theresa struggled with depression and her faith. Yet for me, at least, that makes her gifts more real and profound, not less. We carry this treasure from God in earthen vessels. So that moment in the town square seems to me to be something like Jesus' on the cross; there is real pain there that must not be negated in order to make Francis more appealing. I don't know if what he did was right or not but in the end it isn't the point: the saints are those who move beyond their pain and, by God's grace and through faith, begin to claim the Easter life.

I am grateful to serve a parish named for this guy because it means that in addition to focusing on the poor and mission and stewardship of the earth and blessing animals—all very good things and clearly an integral part of this saint's life—it also means above all else that *we get to be real here*. We get to bring our brokenness and confusion before the presence of God and into a community that values *authenticity*: a community that seeks (with God's help) to love God and love neighbor not just in theory but in the complex *practice* of daily life. Becoming “instruments of God's peace” in such a place is not a slogan: but in a world bent on destruction, in a world where there is so much pain, it means relying utterly on God's grace every step of the way, one day at a time.