

Feast of St. Francis October 5, 2014

Today we CELEBRATE the feast of St. Francis. I emphasize “celebrate” because this is the only way to mark this particular day and this particular Christian. It is not a day that can be *observed* in sophisticated, dour, Episcopalian fashion. The joy and love and foolishness of Francis of Assisi is something that we either have to celebrate, or ignore. It is a day for holy silliness, for sanctified zaniness. If I were a different man, or had a different waistline, I might try a liturgical cartwheel. But, since we’re already down a rector, I’ll play it safe and settle for the craziness that awaits when the animals come to the 9:30 and 10:30 services.

We remember or celebrate saints because they were folks who were particularly good at being Christians. And so we tell their stories to each other and ourselves to remind ourselves of just how well and differently the Christian life can be lived. There are many excellent ways to follow God—and remembering saints gives us examples of how to do it right, and also reminds us that there are many many ways of “doing it right.” Francis is said to be the most admired and least imitated of Christian saints.

Many of you already know a bit about Francis of Assisi, and some of you no doubt know a great deal more about him than I do. But I’ve spent this week thinking about him, and thinking about what his witness has to say to us, today. For those of you who may not know much about him, I think the three word biography of Francis would be poverty, nature, joy. One of these things is not like the others. Let me just tell a few stories, a few legends, about each of these aspects of his life, and then I’ll suggest what it is that ties them all together, and how Francis can best still be an inspiration to us today.

Francis lived at the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th, in Italy. His dad was a pretty well-off cloth merchant, so Francis was expected to go into the family business. But one day while he’s praying in a church, he hears a voice say “Francis, rebuild my church, for you see that it is crumbling.” And so he looks around and sure enough, the church he’s in is in disrepair. So he goes and sells some of his dad’s cloth, uses the money to buy stones, and starts rebuilding that particular church building.

One word for this act would be faith; his father chose the word “theft” and had him arrested. And so when he and his dad have a big showdown in front of the bishop, Francis renounces all material possessions, declares that he will devote his life to serving the poor and sick, and being poor himself. He takes off his clothes and starts going around begging for stones, which he then uses to rebuild churches. For the rest of his life, Francis owned nothing, and spent most of his time preaching to anyone who would listen and trying to help the poor and sick.

He made it a rule that no one he encountered would go away poorer than himself: if he came across a beggar whose cloak was in worse shape than his, he would insist on a trade. He begged for food, and then if possible he gave it away. For reasons we’ll discuss in a moment, Francis is usually pictured surrounded by animals, but he could just as well be pictured always with lepers, for he made a point of showing love and affection to the chronically ill who had been cast out of society.

We Episcopalians mostly remember him today by blessing animals on or around his feast day, but if that’s all that we let St. Francis mean, then we are missing this even more important aspect of his life—his compassion for the poor and the sick. But okay, the animals are important too. Francis undoubtedly loved all of nature and animals, to a

degree that makes the most radical of our contemporary “tree-huggers” look very tame indeed. He referred to animals and elements of nature as his little brothers and sisters: brother fire, sister water, sister bird, and so on, even to the point of “our sister death.”

Most famously, he is supposed to have been walking along the road with his companions one day when he notices that there are a bunch of birds sitting up ahead. And so he says to his friends: wait for me while I go preach to my little sisters the birds. So he goes and preaches to the birds, telling them very politely that they should always praise God for all God had given them.

Today we would call his lifestyle crazy. And in fact, they called it crazy in the thirteenth century, too. At least, anyone who wasn’t converted called it crazy. It doesn’t sound like a very pleasant life. But maybe the most remarkable thing about Francis, our third aspect, is his constant, overwhelming joy. Every account of him stresses this: that owning nothing and serving others, begging for food and then giving it away, he was always filled with joy. You can hear it in the hymns he wrote: when he is encouraging rushing water and fire and wind to praise God, I at least find the joy running through those words contagious and can’t help but laugh, not in mockery, but in sheer happiness and wonder. And I think all creatures of our God and King must have felt the same way when this stick-thin Italian strode through the woods singing at the top of his voice.

His love for animals and nature, his unmatched compassion for the poor and sick, and his overwhelming, contagious joy—what ties these things together in this strange servant of God? And what does that have to say to us today?

I’m not sure that we can all be St. Francis. In fact, I’m pretty confident that God would frown on some of us forsaking family commitments that we have made to become travelling friars. But what is really inaccessible to us is the specifics of what Francis did—his motivation for all of it is available to all of us. And that motivation was extreme delight in the unbounded, irrepressible love of God. We say frequently enough that God loves us, and each Sunday we encourage each other to return that love. Francis shows us what can happen when we radically open our spiritual imaginations to God’s love—when we see God’s love at work among the poor, among animals, rivers, fire, and wind, and even among our enemies.

If we are able to follow Francis to some degree in this, then we cannot help but take delight in God’s creation, and work for the betterment of that creation. For Francis, the sick mattered because God loved them, the animals mattered because God loved them, and his enemies mattered because God loved them. And his expectation was that if God loved them, they were able to love God back. The key to being inspired by Francis is not to undergo rigorous acts of self-denial, but to trust more in the universal particularity of God’s love—every single creature and thing. And if we can do that, then we cannot help but celebrate and serve.