

## St. Francis, October 2, 2016.

I have had occasion, of late, to wonder whether the work I do actually makes much difference. Like you, I really spend a lot of time trying to make my life mean something for other people, and even for God's kingdom. As you know, you (amazingly) pay me to work for the kingdom of God both among you and in the world. And I go to a lot of meetings, I spend time with you, I show up to community panels, to protests, to diocesan commissions, to hospital rooms. I try to be kind and I give money to causes that I believe will make this world a better place, a place more in line with God's will for the world, a place closer to the beloved community that is dear to all of our hearts. You do this stuff too; we do a lot of it together. In fact, if you haven't gotten a call or email from me in the past month or so asking you to do something, let's talk. You're overdue.

I trust that this pattern of life is familiar to you. All of you go to work, do something that you believe in or do something you don't care much about in a way that you believe in. You cultivate friendships in such a way that enriches other people's lives and the community itself. You love family members in such a way that they know that they are valued and that they, too, can make a difference in the world. You volunteer and donate and vote and tip well.

And yet people keep getting shot. People remain trapped under the crushing weight of poverty. People keep getting sick and being cruel and losing hope. And it often seems like the bad guys are winning. We genuinely do the best that we can, and then we come in here on Sunday and pray for the murdered in Chicago and the list never seems to be getting any shorter. And so of course we wonder what we're doing and whether it's actually having any impact. At heart, the question we face all the time is whether our lives and work do in fact have meaning.

And here, a story or legend from the life of St. Francis has been very helpful to me this week. Now as you know, we're blessing animals today, the Feast of St. Francis, because he had a uniquely powerful vision of the ways in which God delights in all of creation and all of creation, including the animals, in its own way gives glory to God. Ideally, the blessing of animals opens our eyes to the remarkable glittering diversity of God's world, and reinforces for us that all this is God's world, participating in God's love and delight. But there is much more to St. Francis than just preaching to the animals and bringing them into the chorus singing glory to God.

Here's one of those stories of "more." Shortly after his conversion, when he perhaps had more enthusiasm than he did wisdom, Francis is hanging out in this town called Assisi. And he has a kind of vision in which God tells him "Francis, rebuild my church." Of course he's harrowed with fear and wonder, but eventually he raises his head and sees right in front of him an old church building that has pretty much completely fallen down. And with a winsome simplicity, he decides that God must be talking about this particular building.

But there are a few problems, most importantly that Francis didn't have any money—and as some of you may know, capital campaigns are a lot of work. So he starts going around to places in town and asking them if they have any stones available. And one by one, he starts getting stones that people don't need—stones that are broken, stones that are the wrong shape, stones that are surplus to requirements. And stone by stone,

often carrying them by hand from a shop or home to the church, he rebuilds the church of San Damiano.

Here's why this story was so helpful to me this week. There must have been days when Francis only got one stone, when it took him all day to get someone to give him one and then for him to transport it to the church. There must have been days when he wondered what on earth he was doing, when he looked at the day's labor and knew that it had been good hard work, but wondered whether it made any difference at all. He must have wondered if he was ever going to finish putting this church back together, and why God had ever asked him to do it. In other words, he must have felt a lot like how we often do.

But here's the thing, Francis did finish rebuilding that church. It still stands today in Assisi and I don't know, maybe some of you fancy world travellers have even seen it. A pile of innumerable stones, each of which must have seemed pointless on its own, did add up into a rebuilt church. And more than that, Francis eventually realized that this call wasn't really about one building, but about that one holy catholic and apostolic church of which we today are still a part.

What this story reminded me of this week is that the individual stones, the meetings, the fundraisers, the kindnesses to those who are beleaguered, may feel insignificant on their own, but they add up to the whole work of the church of Jesus Christ. They add up to our witness in the world to the truth that God loves this world enough that Jesus became part of it, embodying a love so strong that it overcame death. And how could we ever think that that story doesn't make a difference? Amen.