

Stories of Saint Francis
Matthew 16:21-26
Colebrook Congregational Church
October 2, 2016 / 20th Sunday After Pentecost / Feast of Saint Francis

Saint Francis of Assisi is one of the most venerated religious figures in history, because of his commitment, enthusiasm, and faith. He founded three religious orders, including the Franciscans, which was so respected, that when the Crusaders were driven from the Holy Land, the Sultans chose Saint Francis' followers to be the Custodians of the Holy Land, representing the western church there. He dedicated his life to imitating Christ's example, and to carrying out His work; celebrating and honoring poverty, a central aspect of character and lifestyle. He also considered nature to be the mirror of God, and he referred to all creatures as his brothers and sisters, and even preached to the animals. And he is even credited with making the first nativity creche.

Saint Francis was born the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. He enjoyed an easy and carefree lifestyle, full of partying and acquiring more money; and because of his jovial nature, he was well-liked by all. But he sought more than just wealth and partying...but it wasn't holiness, yet...it was glory.

When Assisi declared war on a neighboring town, Francis thought that he was about to get his chance! But instead, he was captured and thrown into a dungeon for a year, waiting for his ransom to be paid. It was reported that he never lost his cheerful disposition...and that this experience did not dampen his pursuit of partying.

He tried again for glory when the call for knights went out for the Fourth Crusade. His father bought him a shiny new suit of armor, and off Francis rode...for one day. That first night, he had a dream that God told him that he had it all wrong and that he should return home. He did, to an enraged father and a town that considered him a coward.

From there, Francis started to turn more toward religious matters, spending more time in prayer, more time in nature, showing compassion for unfortunates that he used to ignore or be repulsed by. He was actively seeking out a conversion level experience.

He received that experience while praying in an ancient and crumbling church when he heard the voice of Jesus say to him, "Francis, repair my church."

Francis, being enthusiastic and impatient, went to his father's shop, took some fabric, and sold it, to get the money needed to repair that church. His father saw this as theft, and dragged him before the bishop to demand restitution and that Francis give up his birthright. He did so, as well as immediately giving him back the clothes he gave him that he was wearing, in exchange for cast off rags. Then he went off into the woods, singing. He then went around begging for stones that he used to rebuild the old church himself.

Next, he started to preach, and slowly attracted companions who shared his new lifestyle of poverty, trusting that God will provide, but he realized that he now needed direction. He opened the Bible to three verses and used them to write his first Rule. He read the command to the young man to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor; the order to the apostles to take nothing on their journeys; and today's selection, the demand to take up the cross daily.

There is a story of these Franciscan Friars traveling the countryside, and if they met someone who had even less than they did, they would tear their own rags to give them something.

Saint Francis believed that what he was expressing was God's brotherhood with all, accepting companions from all walks of life; and practiced true equality by showing love, honor, and respect to every person, no matter their social status. This was extended to include all of God's Creation. The birds were just as much his brother as was pope.

There is a collection of stories about Saint Francis called the “Little Flowers of Saint Francis,” and in one of them, he was traveling between Cannaiolo and Bevagno, an area halfway between Rome and San Marino. Anyway, he noticed trees along the road that were filled with a great multitude of birds and was in awe of the sight. He told his companions to wait while he preached to them. He started with those on the ground, and then those in the trees joined them.

He told them that they owed much to their Creator, and that they ought to sing God's praises at all times and places, because they have been given liberty to fly to all the places; and even though they cannot spin or sew, God has provided them with layers of feathers; even though they do not sow or reap, God feeds them seeds; God has given them fountains and rivers to quench their thirst; mountains and valleys for refuge; and trees in which to build their nests.

God the Creator loves them so much, they have been favored with such bounties. He warned them against the sin of ingratitude, and they should always give thanks to their Creator.

At this point, the gathered birds opened their beaks, made happy noises, and flapped their wings. Then, at Saint Francis' leave, they flew to the four corners to spread the Word.

Saint Francis truly lived his life in imitation of Jesus Christ, and we can learn from his example and his ministry. He gave up everything and put his trust in God, having faith that God would provide what he needed, that he always remembered to thank God for the bounty, and that what was provided was to be shared with others in need, because every Creature was his brother or sister.

Especially on this day, where we offer God's Blessings to the Animals, we recognize that we are all Creatures of God, no matter what the form they come in. Following Saint Francis' example, we can take comfort and have faith that God will always provide for our needs, no matter what. We have to recognize that provision when God sends it to us, and be in a position to accept it. And then, we must always remember to tell God: "Thank you."

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Creator and Provider God, we thank you for the example of Saint Francis, whose faith in You was so strong, that he had so much, even though he had so little; and to whom all God's Creatures were brothers and sisters. We ask for Your help in following his example of faith, and of treating every living thing with kindness, love, and respect. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

O God, You invite us to hold the needs of our sisters and brothers as dear to us as our own needs, no matter what form they hold. Loving our neighbors as ourselves, we offer our thanksgivings and our petitions on behalf of this church and the world.

We give You thanks for all Your blessings and gifts. May we use them wisely, in the manner You want us to do.

We know that we do not always live up to the standards that come with being followers of Jesus. We ask Your pardon for any misdeeds and for failing short of loving all our neighbors, and we thank You for Your grace in forgiving all who come before You.

We pray for our neighbors. We ask for comfort to those in distress. We ask for wellness to those unwell in mind, body, or spirit. We ask for refuge for those uprooted by fire, flood, or famine. We ask for justice for those who are victims of violence, and their families. We also ask that You guide the hands of those who are in a position to use their gifts to help others.

Creator of all things and giver of all life, let Your blessing be upon all our animals. May our relationships with them mirror Your love, and our care for them be an example of your bountiful mercy. Grant our animals health and peace & strengthen our love and care for them.

We pray for ourselves. We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, and for Your strength of spirit to do what is right, and to act generously towards all, full of Christ's Love. We offer to You, the prayers of our hearts, both silent and spoken, confident that You will hear them and respond.

We especially pray for:

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to You, that we all may be one with You, as You are one with us in Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

Responsive Reading
Canticle of the Sun

by St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226)

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord!

All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing.

To You, alone, Most High, do they belong.

No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all Your creatures,

Especially through my lord Brother Sun,

Who brings the day; and You give light through him.

And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!

Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars;

In the heavens You have made them bright, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,

and clouds and storms, and all the weather,

through which You give Your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water;

she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire,

through whom You brighten the night.

He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth,

who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of You; through those who endure sickness and trial.

Happy those who endure in peace, for by You, Most High, they will be crowned.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Bodily Death, from whose embrace no living person can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin!

Happy those she finds doing Your most holy will.

The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks,

and serve Him with great humility.

Matthew 6:21-26

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' 23 But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'