

SERMON Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints – Francis of Assisi

Deuteronomy 30: 9-14

For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Luke 10: 25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ²⁶He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' ²⁷He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' ²⁸And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' ³⁰Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' ³⁷He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

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Today we are continuing our sermon series from the book, “Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints” by Daneen Akers.* Unlike Alice Paul, who was unknown to most if not all of us, I imagine just about everyone here has heard of Francis of Assisi. He is an actual saint in the Roman Catholic Church. His life is one that reflects the words from Deuteronomy. For Francis, the word of God was not distant – not across the sea or somewhere in heaven. As we heard in Deuteronomy, “No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

The word of God, was truly near to Francis, it was in his mouth and his heart and evident in the way he lived his life. Though it was not always so. Francis did not start out planning to be saint-like.

Francis was born into a well-to-do family, living in luxury. His father was a successful cloth merchant. And Francis hung out with other wealthy young men. They could be found partying into the night; even waking up the people of Assisi as they wandered down the streets late at night singing. And like other wealthy young men, Francis dreamed about being a knight, a Crusader.

So when Francis went off to fight the Muslims, his father bought him an expensive new suit of armor. But going off to war did not go as that wealthy young man planned. On the way to battle, Francis encountered an old knight, with rusty old armor. He was moved and gave his brand new, expensive suit of armor away to that old knight. Not a typical thing to do on the way to battle. And when Francis got to battle, he saw suffering and pain, which distressed him and made him think. He questioned the wisdom of war, especially a war where Christians were killing Muslims if they did not convert to Christianity. That hardly seemed like something Jesus would support, killing a person because that person did not believe in him.

Anyway, Francis was captured and while waiting for his father provide the money for his ransom, he became very ill. He eventually returned home to recover. And when finally did he recover he returned to battle. Well, he planned to return to battle but got sick again. While ill, Francis had a vision of God. In that vision, God

told Francis to serve God and not those in authority. Francis then turned to prayer and meditated on this. He discerned that God wanted him to serve the poor.

Not long after his realization, Francis was walking down the street and heard a leper approaching. You could hear persons with leprosy approach because they were required to wear a bell that jingled and would warn people they were coming so people would stay clear of them. Leprosy was contagious so people avoided them, even having them live in their own community – isolated from healthy people.

Unlike other times when Francis had walked away from lepers, this time Francis asked that man with leprosy if he could hug him. And he did. Francis hugged the leper. This brought Francis great joy.

Then he asked the man to bring him to see the others who had leprosy. Francis hugged all of them. Seeing their struggle, he then went home. He returned to the leper colony, bringing clothes and food from his house to these people.

Francis' generosity, giving away the families clothing and food, infuriated his father, who threatened to disown him. But instead, Francis stood in the public square, stripped naked, gave his clothing to his father and denounced his inheritance saying, "Now I serve only God." And still naked, he walked to a nearby, dilapidated church. There the priest gave Francis a coarse robe that he put on and tied it with a rope around his waist. He helped to repair that church and lived there. And if you go to Assisi today, you can see the stone slab in a tiny alcove where Francis slept.

Francis found freedom and much joy in this simple lifestyle and lack of material goods. He shared whatever he received with the poor; caring for people and all creation. In fact Francis is known for his love of all creation – from rocks to worms to birds and even wolves. Stories abound of his gentleness, his care for, and his conversations with creation.

You could say that for Francis, lepers, the sick, the poor, and in fact all of creation were his neighbor. Actually he considered them all his brothers and sisters. He cared for them not out of a sense of obligation, but from a place of deep love and joy.

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus and asked him what he needed to do to gain eternal life. Jesus asked him what the law required. The lawyer knew the law from the Torah and correctly answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' But that was not enough for the lawyer. He wanted to justify himself and then asked Jesus who was his neighbor.

Jesus responded by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. As you know, Samaritans and Jews were enemies. But the Samaritan in Jesus' story saw a man wounded, a Jewish man, lying alongside the road. This Samaritan touched that bleeding man, that unclean man, and dressed his wounds. Then he brought the one who was hurt to an inn and paid the innkeeper to care for him.

Francis hugged the leper and all the lepers, people who were considered unclean and who lived on the margins of society. You could say Francis was a good Samaritan, bringing healing to the one, the ones, who were living at the side of the road through his interactions. But Francis, in those hugs and in his reaching out, found great joy. His experience changed his life. His vision of God, his prayer and meditation had shown him his mission, to serve God. And the joy he felt in his interactions with those persons with leprosy inspired him to care for them and others who were poor, and to care for creation. His love for others and creation moved him deeply and directed him in his mission.

What do you think the lawyer thought of Jesus' story? Jesus tells us that the lawyer asked who his neighbor was in an attempt to justify himself. Jesus did not say that the lawyer wanted to love or serve his neighbor. Do you think the lawyer could imagine finding joy in caring for another?

Do you think that the Samaritan felt a sense of joy after he cared for that wounded man in the ditch by the road and brought him to stay with the innkeeper? Or might it have been a sense of peace?

What about you? Have you ever found joy in helping your "neighbor" - a stranger, someone who was sick, a child in foster care, someone on the margins of society?

Remember, "the word of God is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart." The word of God is love. God will remind us of this when we pray and meditate on God's word. When we ask God for guidance, not to justify ourselves but from our desire to serve others, God will show us the way. And when God's

love is lived and shared through caring for other people and for creation, it can be a source of great joy.

To close this message, I invite you to pray with me the “Prayer of Saint Francis” of Assisi that is in your bulletin as an insert.

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

* Akers, Daneen. Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints. “Francis of Assisi” (U.S.: Watchfire Media, 2019.) pp 62-67.

