

## St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the Feast of St. Francis 2020

As much as I love the St. Francis statues that many households, including our own church, have in their gardens, I sometimes wish I could throw them all out.

This is by no means because I have a lack of respect for St. Francis. Quite the opposite, in fact. The problem with these statues is that they reduce the awesome magnitude of this great saint and make it look way too easy to follow in his footsteps.

Anyone can stand in a bucolic garden, admire the beauty of its flora and fauna, and see the hand of God in that beauty. And this is of course a wonderful thing that all of us would benefit from doing. But if we're going to properly honor Francis of Assisi, we're going to need to take things several layers deeper than that.

Let's look at three of the most significant events in this great saint's life. Most of us are probably at least somewhat familiar with these stories already, but they bear repeating.

The first is Francis and the wolf of Gubbio. During the time that the saint lived in the city of Gubbio, legend has it that the town was consistently terrorized by a local wolf. The wolf would enter the city limits regularly and not only make short work of many of its domestic animals but also occasionally take on a human resident. The situation had become so dire that the men of the city would routinely walk around armed as though they were living in an active war zone. Francis, we're told, took it upon himself to engage the wolf. He found a way to communicate with the animal in a way that the wolf could understand, and he ultimately

brokered a peace between the wolf and the town that was acceptable to both.

The second story is the one of Francis and the leper. Much as in biblical times, a variety of chronic diseases that all fell under the label of leprosy were common in Francis' time and place. People suffering from these diseases were thought to be unsafe and unclean and were shunned by the rest of society. They were required to live outside of community limits and even to ring bells as they went about so as to warn others of their presence.

Apparently on one encounter with a leprous individual, Francis found himself moved to break the customs of the time. Rather than backing away from the leper, he moved in and engaged the person as a fellow human being, even going to far as to share an embrace and a kiss.

The final, and perhaps most dramatic story is Francis' encounter with the Sultan of Egypt at the height of the crusades. During a campaign that held the city of Damietta under siege and ultimately involved an unsuccessful attempt to capture Cairo, Francis did a wild and extraordinary thing. With the grudging consent of his superiors, he crossed enemy lines and asked for an audience with the Sultan, not knowing at all if he would return from his adventure alive. His request for a peaceful parlay was granted, and Francis spent many days behind enemy lines. During that time, both he and some of the Sultan's most eminent theologians were granted an opportunity to make a case for their respective faiths, and Francis had an opportunity to observe Egyptian Muslim life first-hand. While in the end no one was converted in this adventure, and the bloody battles of the crusades would still rage for some time afterward, Francis' visit undeniably built a

bridge of mutual understanding and respect that had been almost nonexistent at that point in history.

This St. Francis, the Francis of history, is a figure far wilder and more complex than our garden statues. This St. Francis is a man whose love of God's creation is expressed by walking headlong into danger and risking wrath and reproach at a level that would terrify most of us.

The theme, the overarching ethos of Francis' whole life as expressed by his actions, boils down to a single word: Love. Francis loves. He loves all of creation, without exception. He loves the plant, the animal, and the human. He loves the diseased, and he loves the healthy. He loves the Christian, and he loves the Muslim. Francis loves, wildly and indiscriminately. And he loves because he reads in Scripture that God *is* love, and those who are made in God's image and likeness must do likewise.

But this is no sappy, sentimental kind of love. This is the kind love that stands up and does not back down when the weapons of war are aimed at it from every side. It is also the kind of love that is not dependent on agreement or warm feelings toward the other party. Francis disagreed sharply with his Muslim counterparts on many points, but he still found love for them. He was, by his own admission, repulsed by the lepers he embraced, but he still found love for them.

It's tempting to think that perhaps Francis was just some extraordinary kind of person whose DNA allowed him to achieve depths of love that are inaccessible to the rest of it, but I don't believe Francis himself would allow us the luxury of thinking that way.

It's accessible to everyone. It's also very difficult, and Francis knew this better than anyone.

It's no accident that in addition to these wonderful stories, Francis' other monumental achievement was to be the founder of one of the great mendicant religious orders of the Catholic church. Francis joined St. Dominic, St. Clare, and others in at a time of religious renewal in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to found the Order of Friars Minor, widely known today as the Franciscans.

Every member of the order, then and now, must make and keep three central vows: chastity, obedience, and poverty. In other words, professed members must abstain from sexually intimate relationships, they must obey their superior members in all things, and they must disavow private ownership of any property.

Now for most of us, such a way of life might seem rather extreme, but it's there for a reason. And it's not the one you might think. It's not because chastity, obedience, and poverty are particularly holy disciplines. They certainly are, but there are many equally holy disciplines. The reasons that they are required of Franciscans is simply that they are disciplines.

The whole point of Franciscan life is to cultivate the sort of love that Francis demonstrated in his life, and doing thing requires discipline. Love is a discipline.

We live in a culture that portrays love, at least the romantic kind, and really most other kinds as well, as something that just happens to us if we're lucky. But Francis understood that this isn't how true love works at all. Love is a choice we make and then must practice daily to make it stick. The name for the act of making a conscious choice and then practicing it is discipline. This is why the life of a Franciscan entails such stringent discipline.

So what disciplines might work for us? What are the practical ways in which we can choose to love in the wild and profligate way Francis did and then consistently rehearse that love until it sinks deep into our bones? It doesn't necessarily need to be chastity, poverty, and obedience, but it does need to be something. Our disciplines around how we make and spend our money, how we eat, how we do or do not engage in intimate relationships with others matter tremendously. If we use them rightly, they can cultivate in us the burning divine love that Francis clearly felt and acted out.

My friends, this is the true message of the Feast of St. Francis. It is that love is a discipline. It is not something that just happens willy-nilly. It doesn't matter if it's love toward non-human creatures, toward the earth, toward a community, toward a friend,

toward a relative, toward a romantic partner, toward a complete stranger, or even toward an enemy. Love, the love that God insists we have in us if we're going to be called God's children, is something we choose and, once chosen, something we practice. It's up to us to figure out what we must do to make that happen.