

04 October 2009
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Well I greet you on this Feast of Blessed Francis of Assisi. We take this Sunday every year or the closest one to the actual Feast of Francis to honor Francis but also as an opportunity for us to give thanks and praise for all of creation. And it's an opportune time.

It's the harvest season. It's a time for us when these seasons are changing for us to become more and more aware of our place in God's created order and of the role that we have with God being stewards of this creation, stewards of our relationships, stewards of one another and the world.

Francis has reached levels of domestication rivaled only by Jesus. They are such challenging characters, it is so easy for us to—how many times have you heard somebody say: 'Who do you think I am? Jesus Christ?' when we're given some challenging expectation. Same could be said for Francis.

Jesus grew up in probably a humble, humble peasant beginning. Francis grew up the son of a wealthy textile merchant. He lived the high life. His father traveled around and loved all things French so when Francis was born, Papa was away in France on business or whatever...when he gets home and finds out that Mom has already had the baby baptized and given some other name he was furious and changed his name to Francesco—France.

So he grows up in this very privileged household. He becomes what was known as a troubadour, living the high life. You can imagine how this boy was dressed with his dad in the textile business. He was a musician and a poet and a lover of women and he partied with the best of them.

At age 20 he answers Assisi's call to go to war against Perugia, another city state. (This was before Italy was Italy.) Francis gets captured and held for a year as a POW. Comes back...he's not quite the same party boy he had been but he kind of tries to get back into that life that he had been living before. Doesn't happen. He just...it's not working for him anymore.

He gets really sick. Almost dies. And while he's sick, he has this real transformation. After his illness he starts taking life a little more seriously. He begins to do ministry helping out at a leper colony.

His father is furious. So he tries to convince him to give that foolishness up. Then he tries to beat it out of him.

And finally in rebellion against his father and everything he stands for and strips himself naked in the church and renounces his name, renounces his life. And that's really the beginning of the Francis that we come to know. One who sets aside this life of

privilege, this life of wealth, this life of superficiality and really begins to go deeper. It's not the end of the line; it's the first step for Francis.

Well, many of the stories that come down about Francis and his foundation of the Friars Minor, many are probably hagiography, you know, apocryphal stories that were told more as parables than they were as history but they all focus on the intensity with which—the joyful intensity—in which Francis embraced life.

Life. Life in its depths and in its heights. Life in every aspect. He gives praise to God. He looks at everything around him and he sees nothing but God.

Everything is an expression of the divine revelation that is just exploding in front of him. It completely knocks down any sort of hierarchy of creation, much less any social hierarchies in the society around him.

In an age when it was thought that even being near a leper was going to transmit the disease to you, Francis embraces a leper. In a time when the poor were considered at best chattel and just maybe slight step above a good mule, he embraces sister poverty. He was the one who in a sense began that whole idea of living simply so that others can simply live. He was the ultimate environmentalist, the ultimate stewardship campaign manager; he was the ultimate in so many things because he took it so seriously.

His was not a “Yes, but...” Christianity. Now for 99.9% of the rest of Christendom we're all at one level or another a little bit “yes, but...” We look at someone like Jesus, we can say: “Oh, well, you know, fully man but fully divine—let's don't forget that.” We look at Francis and that's just almost as challenging as Jesus and it's all: ‘Well, yeah, you know, it sounds really good but...’ ‘It sounds like a great idea but...’ ‘You know, I know I would really get something out of this *but...*’

It's what makes us a little uncomfortable. No, it makes us a lot uncomfortable. So we domesticate Francis. He becomes the patron saint of the bird bath and it's easy to deal with him. You know, he's the guy with the bunnies and the birds so it's easy to kind of blow him off. And so....isn't he cute? Isn't that sweet? Look, the bird's on his hand! Because he makes us so uncomfortable.

And guess what? In his day when he was still walking around he made people even more uncomfortable because he was right there. It wasn't just some image in our courtyard. It was the guy. And he's right there doing what he did.

He was not one of these who would say “I think you should” and meanwhile he doesn't. Talk about lead by example! Nobody could keep up.

And from the first moment of the foundation of the Friar Minors there is resistance to the rule because it is so strict. Unlike most of the other orders of its day which had great endowments and had jewel encrusted chalices and huge land holdings and all of this wealth, the Friar Minors, they were beggars. If you needed anything like, you know, a

crust of bread, you begged for it. They didn't have any kind of jobs, they didn't do work to earn money, they didn't go and do supply work in the local church because none of them were priests. They were deacons at most. So the work that they did was of a diaconal ministry, not a priestly ministry.

So they're out there with their hands out - not for themselves most of the time. They would receive and give it away. They would have a crust of bread to keep them going so they could help someone else. It was very strict and from the beginning there were those who were just not able to keep the pace. Who could?

But there's this example out there. There's this one and I'm sure others who go nameless because of the nature of Franciscans—not exactly the most self-promoting people. There is this example.

For us, it is a path that we're on with them and what that example can do for us is to raise our consciousness, to help ask the question: Is this a want or a need? Is this something that rather than purchase it I might take that money and put it away and give it to someone or buy food for the poor or give it to the church? To somehow pass that on. To see ourselves as conduits rather than—I hate this phrase—consumers. To see in all things—I just love this image of seeing in all things, rocks, water, the wind, everything, all things, even death—a manifestation of God and God's grace. That says it all.

When we begin to see life and the world, even if it's just little glimpses, as everything is a manifestation of God and God's loving, joyful benevolent grace, we will be changed. We will be transformed and if it's just, just a little bit then next time it's the next little bit and all of it is a cumulative effect of that opening, that cracking open, that waking from the hypnosis, that waking from the dream that we have that we're here to accumulate as much stuff and to eat as much as we possibly can and consume as much of the world's resources as we possibly can before we die, and if we do, we win!

One of the biggest lies you'll ever see is this: The one who dies with the most toys wins. I love that notion that rather than one who dies with the most toys wins, that idea of death as the door opening into an even more full relationship with God so that we can embrace death. And that in that embracing of death we can fully embrace life because we fear nothing.

Francis was absolutely fearless. When you don't fear death there's nothing else to fear. Loss of name? Francis gave his away. Reputation? Hah! They thought he was crazy. He's got nothing to lose. And even to whatever degree we can become even the slightest bit fearless that unleashes us, unbinds us, so that we can then begin to fully embrace life without barriers, without shields, without 'yes, but...' to fully embrace life in all of its fullness. And for Francis, even pain was an opportunity to fully experience God's grace. It's so challenging. It's so easy for me to stand here in this pulpit and to say these things but to embrace it like Francis is such a challenge!

And yet, it seems to me that we love challenge, we love all kinds of challenges, like push ourselves to do something, to learn something new, to accomplish something. What if we took this on as a challenge? What if each of us in our own way found some way we can embrace this path that both Jesus and Francis lay out for us? All of it based in looking at ourselves and all that God has created as an expression of God's love. I wonder...

Amen.