

Jeremiah 22:13-16
Psalm 148:7-14
Galatians 6:14-18
Matthew 11:25-30

Feast of St Francis (*transferred*)
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Perfect Peace, Perfect Joy

For most people I've encountered, St Francis has something to do with a birdbath. He is a statue, just like the one at the door brought from our garden at home. And whether there are birds on his head, birds on his arms, or birds flocking to be in his presence, there are always birds. People recognize Francis by the birds, and also by the funny hair. And the brown robe – no fancy vestments for him, always the rough brown robe, the rope belt with the 3 knots to remind him of his vows, and sandals. Never shoes. Always sandals.

Even with the funny hair, the funny clothes and footwear inappropriate to the weather, Francis is a romantic figure for most of us – preaching to the birds, taming the scary wolf of Gubbio, changing the mind and the heart of the Pope with nothing but a soothing voice and a heart filled with compassion. Even people who would never dream of setting foot in a church know who Francis is. This is important information for us.

I don't think people know Francis so much because of the bird baths or the gardens. I think people know Francis because they know a bit of his story. I think people know Francis because he was profoundly human and radically authentic. As a child, Francis was a spoiled little rich boy who was set for life from the moment of his birth. His wealthy father offered the inheritance of a family business, and his gorgeous mother doted on him so much that his life of ease and pleasantries and privilege meant that there was absolutely nothing he needed to do to make his own way. Yet as a young man, even all this couldn't satisfy Francis. He wanted more power and prestige than his family's money could buy. He wanted a knighthood.

So when Assisi went to war, Francis took up the sword and shield, and set off to prove himself worthy of his dream of becoming a knight. When finally, in the midst of the bloody Christian Crusades, Francis of Assisi set off to enter into battle as a knight in shining armor, something strange happened before he ever arrived on the battleground, something he never in his wildest imaginings could have concocted. Francis of Assisi encountered the living God, and his entire world turned upside down.

Although he had been given everything he could ever need and most everything he could ever want, when Francis encountered God, he had some tough realizations. The recognition that he was always striving, never satisfied, always left empty and wanting, settled around him like a winter cloak. Even in the midst of what appeared to be a perfect life, Francis recognized a deep emptiness, and that emptiness was for him, unbearable. Strangely enough, when Francis walked away from his life of certainty and plenty and ease to take up a life of uncertainty and poverty and unspeakable difficulty, his burden lightened and his steps lightened and his whole being became a light that lightened a dark and dreary world. You see, when Francis let loose of all of

the rules that had governed his life – the family rules, the rules of commerce, the political rules and the religious rules – the heavy burden of an inauthentic life was lifted from him, and his load was immeasurably lightened. And as he gathered with other Jesus followers, his burden became lighter still. As he lived into the life of what would surely look like a crazy person to you or me, dancing in the rain, talking to birds and trees, calling the sun, moon and stars his sisters and brothers... as he lived into this life of seeing God in all things, his burden lightened and lightened until it seemed there was nothing there. That is not to say that his life became easy... as much as we romanticize St Francis, his life was never easy. To embrace poverty as he did was to embrace a life that promised nothing in hand, but much in heart, so not knowing where the next meal would come from was little in the face of the sweetness of a life that saw God's glory in every part of creation and took joy in every breath. His life was rich and real and authentic, but it wasn't easy.

Transformation isn't like that for most of us. Most of us don't have shocking and radical conversions that call us to leave our families, give away everything we own and become traveling fools for Christ. For most of us, God works on us and in us as water works on stone... slowly and persistently smoothing out our rough edges, changing the shape of our being. When we allow God to work in us, we too change in ways that are no less real or important than the changes God worked in Francis. Whether gentle or explosive, how God does what God does isn't so much our concern. What we do concern ourselves with, what Francis concerned himself with, was the reality of God alive and truly present in our midst, calling us ever more deeply into radically authentic lives of discipleship.

Though Francis seems like a perfect saint, a joyful dreamer, even a mythic figure, what is so spectacular about him is that he really did live fully into the life of discipleship that was authentically his own. He didn't try to live like saints before him, he lived his own authentic life, and in doing that, he didn't show us how to be a perfect saint. Instead, he showed us that no matter who we are or where we come from, God will use everything we have if we will only say "yes." Yes, I will let your yoke settle on me; yes, I will learn from you; yes, I will rest in the refreshment that is a life lived with deep meaning and purpose in gratitude and grace. What that looks like will be different for each one of us, and yet what God calls you into, what God calls me into is as real and authentic as what God called Francis into. God calls all of us into a life of discipleship, but always, always that life is uniquely our own.

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' We hear this passage as one of gentle respite, of rest and refreshment, and that is surely something of what Jesus is saying. That doesn't mean he's saying that life with him will be "easier" than life with the Pharisees or the Roman occupiers or the demons of our own making. I assure you, it is not. Many would say that Francis had a much "easier" life as a rich young socialite without a care in the world, than he did as a homeless beggar who owned nothing more than the clothes on his back. But when Francis found his identity in God, when he came into that truth of himself, the heavy burden of a life without meaning or purpose fell away. It's what happens for you and me too. It isn't that

following Jesus makes all the troubles go away, it certainly does not. But when we ground our identity in God and in loving Christian community as Francis did, our everyday lives become purposeful – and they become sacramental, outward and visible signs of God’s love and grace in the world.

When we gather as Christian community, when we hear the Word of God, hang out with church people, drink the wine and eat the bread, when we look for the best in one another, when we are kind... God is working on us and in us, helping us to see our lives as sacred and holy. When we love the children in our midst, recycle everything we can, when we’re compassionate, when we speak the truth in love, our lives become sacramental. When we take our time preparing meals, gaze at the moon or take a walk and notice the changing leaves and changing seasons, our lives become sacramental. When we use our words to build up the body of Christ, when we choose tolerance or even love over certainty and sides, our lives become sacramental. And when we do those things, we find ourselves humming hymns while we’re doing the laundry, silently thanking God for the beauty of the golden autumn light, seeing the unkindness around us as brokenness to be loved into wholeness, rather than opposition to be squashed or ugliness to be turned away from. The more we ground our identity in God, the more we take on Jesus’ gentle yoke and learn from him, the more authentically we will live into our discipleship, into the calling that is ours alone. And the more our lives are infused with God’s grace and mercy, the more we, like Francis, become outward and visible signs of God’s unspeakable grace, the more we become sacraments of God’s love in the world.

Will it be easy? It will not. Following the God of love goes against everything our culture says matters – being the most important, being at the top of the heap, being right, taking sides, caring about winning rather than the means by which we win, forgetting that the bottom line is measured in a changed world rather than dollars and cents. All those other things are heavy burdens indeed. They will not refresh us, they will not heal the world, and they certainly won’t give us peace. “Come to me,” Jesus says, “and I will give you rest. I will give you peace. I will give you life.” While life as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth might not always be easy, it is surely the lighter burden. And as St Francis was so fond of saying, it is indeed “perfect joy.” Amen.