

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
October 3, 2021
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Perfect Peace, Perfect Joy

Today we celebrate the Feast of St Francis. For many people, St Francis has something to do with a birdbath. He is a statue that stands in the garden, usually accompanied by bunnies and birds. People recognize Francis by the birds, the funny hair-do, the rough brown robe and rope belt with the 3 knots to remind him of his vows. And the sandals. Never shoes. Always sandals. Francis lived very simply. And he was in love with Lady Poverty. But even with his commitment to poverty, his funny hair, odd clothes and footwear inappropriate for most weather, Francis remains a romantic figure – preaching to the birds, taming the scary wolf of Gubbio, changing the Pope’s mind with his deep commitment to living as Jesus lived.

People who would never dream of setting foot in a church know who Francis is, and I don’t think it’s because of the bird baths or the gardens. I think people know Francis because they know a bit of his story, know that 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 he was born. 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 that couldn’t satisfy Francis. He wanted more power and prestige than his family’s money could buy. He wanted a knighthood. He joined the war against Perugia, where he was captured, held prisoner for over a year and became gravely ill. But once released and recovered, Francis got back on his horse to join in the bloody Christian crusades, and this time, as a knight in shining armor. But something strange happened on his journey to the battleground, something Francis never in his wildest dreams could have imagined. Francis of Assisi encountered the living God, and his entire world turned upside down. He had a vision that called him back to Assisi to respond to a call to a different sort of knighthood, taking off the armor of battle and putting on the armor of God. When he returned to Assisi, he dedicated himself to solitude and prayer in order to listen for what God was calling him into.

We don’t often hear that part of Francis’ story, yet I think it is one of the most compelling things about him. He dedicated himself to solitude and prayer so he could listen for God’s will in his life. And when he finally heard God’s call to live as Christ in the world, he responded with his whole life.

I wonder what that would be like? I don’t mean giving up everything and living in complete poverty – that was Francis’ call, and likely not ours. But I wonder what it would be like to authentically respond to God’s call with the entirety of our lives?

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, because the heavy burden of an inauthentic life was lifted from him. 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 no burden there.

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 the way water works on stone, slowly and persistently smoothing out our rough edges and changing the shape of our being. When we allow God to work in us, we too change in ways that are just as real and important as the changes God worked in Francis. We don't need to concern ourselves with how God does what God does. What we do concern ourselves with, what Francis concerned himself with, is the reality of God alive and truly present throughout all of creation, calling us ever more deeply into radically authentic lives of discipleship. I've been thinking a lot about what that means for me, about what it would be to give over entirely to God. And I wonder - what does a radically authentic life of discipleship look like for you?

Though Francis seems like a perfect saint, a joyful dreamer, even a mythic figure, what is so spectacular about him is that he listened for God's call to him and responded by living 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. He wasn't striving to be a perfect saint. Instead, his life shows us that no matter who we are or where we come from, God will use everything we have – which of course is all a gift from God - 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.

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,’ Jesus said ‘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 soul.’ 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. 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. For Francis and his companions, not knowing where the next meal would come from unimportant in the face of the sweetness of a life that saw God's glory in all of creation and took joy in every breath. His life was rich and real and authentic, but it wasn't easy. You see, when Francis found his identity in God, when he recognized who he truly was, the heavy burden of a life without meaning or purpose fell away.

That can happen for us, too. It isn't that following Jesus makes all our 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 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 becoming sacramental.

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 beautiful meals, when we gaze at the moon or take a walk and really notice the changing leaves and changing seasons, when we see the sacred in everything, our lives become sacramental. When we use our words to build up the body of Christ, when we choose love over certainty or taking sides, our lives become sacramental. And when that happens, we find ourselves yoked with God in ways we never would have imagined – God filling our minds and our hearts with gratitude and joy, enabling us to see the suffering and 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 the sacramental calling that is God's gift to us.

When Jesus said "Take my yoke upon you," he was asking us to bind ourselves to him. A yoke connects two creatures and causes them to move together, making it impossible to pull in different directions. That's what my collar is for me – yes, it's a symbol that I am a clergy person, but it reminds me that I am yoked with God. And the more we are yoked with God, the more we become outward and visible signs of God's unspeakable grace, sacraments of God's love in the world.

Will it be easy? Not likely. Following the God of love goes against everything our culture says matters – being the most important, being at the top, being right, taking sides, caring about winning rather than the means by which we win, forgetting that the bottom line is measured by a changed world, not by dollar and cents. Those are the heavy burdens. They will not refresh us, they will not heal the world, and they certainly won't bring peace.

"Come to me," Jesus says, "I will give you rest. I will give you peace. I will give you life." While life as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth is not easy, it is surely the lighter burden. And as St Francis was so fond of saying, it is indeed "perfect joy." Amen.