

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 1, 2023 – FEAST OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI (*observed*)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Humility and Simplicity—a pathway to Christ*”

Old Testament	Job 39:1–18	(God is the Creator of all things)
Psalter	Psalms 121	(Our help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth)
Epistle	Galatians 6:14-18	(Paul prays never to boast in anything except Christ’s cross)
Gospel	St. Matthew 11:25–30	(Jesus is humble and gentle; in Him we find rest)

“Here is our rule,” Francis said, as simple and as impossible as it seemed: “Live by the Gospel.” Francis took the Gospel so literally that once he made a fellow monk run after a thief who stole Francis’ hood, imploring the man to take his, too! In another well-known tale, Francis preached to hundreds of birds about being thankful to God for their wonderful clothes, for their independence, and for God’s care. The story claims the birds stood still as Francis walked among them, only flying off when he dismissed them.¹

Francis’ simplicity of life extended to both ideas and actions. If there was a simple, direct way— even if it seemed impossible—Francis preferred to take it. So, when he wanted approval for his monastic order, in the year 1210 he went straight to Rome to see Pope Innocent III (1161-1216). You can imagine what the Pope thought when this barefoot, ragged beggar approached His Holiness. As a matter of fact, he threw Francis out!

And yet, there was something so compelling, so charismatic, so *holy* about this humble man, the Pope commanded him to return, and ended by approving the Franciscan Order. Undoubtedly, St. Francis was as qualified as any to be ordained a priest, but he never was. He felt unworthy to ascend the altar steps and call upon God’s power to bring about the miracle of the Holy Eucharist.

In many ways St. Francis’ life mirrored that of Jesus Christ. Not only was he the first saint in history to receive the stigmata—all five bleeding wounds of Christ—but also, both were socially and economically insignificant men who wandered around small villages preaching to whomever would listen.

Neither had any political power, nor did they lead any armies into battle. And yet, both changed the world significantly. People who knew Francis felt they were encountering Jesus Himself.

What does Saint Francis’ witness teach us today?² Not merely with words, but by his life? Perhaps his first and most essential witness is that being a Christian means having a living relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ. It means clothing ourselves with Christ (Romans 13:14) through being conformed to His example in thought, word, and deed (Romans 8:29)—and all of this by calling upon God’s grace.

Francis’ journey to Christ began as he prayed before the life-sized crucifix in the ruined Church of San Damiano, Italy. It began with the gaze of the crucified Christ—with Jesus looking down at Francis at the very moment He gave his life for us and drew us to Himself.

On that cross, Jesus is depicted not as dead, but alive! Blood is flowing from His wounded hands, feet, and side, but that blood speaks of life. Jesus’ eyes are not closed but wide open, as He gazes at us in a way that touches our hearts. The cross does not speak to us about defeat and failure; paradoxically, it speaks to us about a death which is life, a death that *gives* life. For it speaks to us of love, the love of God incarnate, a love which does not die, but triumphs eternally over evil and death. When we allow the crucified Jesus to gaze upon us, we are recreated; we become “a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Everything else starts with this: the experience of Christ’s transforming grace, the experience of being loved for no merits of our own, in spite of our being such self-absorbed sinners. That’s why Saint Francis could say with Saint Paul: “Far be it for me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

We turn to you, Blessed Francis, and we ask you: Teach us to remain before the cross, to let the crucified Christ gaze upon us, to let ourselves be forgiven, and be recreated by His love.

In today's Gospel we heard, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:28-29). This provides the second witness Francis gives us: that everyone who follows Christ receives true peace, the peace that Christ alone can give, and which the world cannot give. Many people, when they think of Saint Francis, think of peace; however, very few go deeper to discover its source.

The peace that Francis received, experienced, and lived, and which he passes on to us, is the peace of Christ, born of the greatest love of all, the Divine love that is shown to us on the cross. It is the peace which the risen Jesus gave to His disciples when He stood in their midst and said: "Peace be with you!" And in saying this, Christ showed them His wounded hands and His pierced side (cf. John 20:19-20). That suffering is the source of our peace—peace with God forever.

Franciscan peace is not something saccharine that comes with a smiley face. Hardly! That's not the real Saint Francis. Nor is it a kind of pantheistic harmony with the forces of nature. That's not Franciscan either; it's a notion unbelievers have invented. The peace of Saint Francis is the peace of Christ, and it is found by those who "take up their yoke," namely, Christ's commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you" (cf. John 13:34; 15:12). This yoke cannot be borne with arrogance, presumption, or pride, but only with humility and simplicity of heart.

We turn to you, Blessed Francis, and we ask you: Teach us to be "instruments of peace," of that peace which has its source in God, the peace which Christ alone can bring us.³

The unexpected way St. Francis changed the world was through his example. His revolutionary way of thinking is so radically simple that anyone can attempt it! All you need to do is follow the Gospel; live simply and humbly; and show your joy to the world. When others see the beauty of a life united to God, they are immediately attracted to it.

St. Francis never expected his little band of brothers to be of any significance, and yet today, more than 800 years later, Franciscans are one of the largest religious orders in the world!⁴ Francis believed that a life lived authentically, rooted in the Gospel, has more power than any king or earthly ruler. And by His life's witness, Jesus showed us that is indeed possible!

Do you want to see positive changes in the world? If so, don't try becoming powerful according to earthly standards. Start simply by beginning with yourself and gradually influencing those in your own back yard. The Gospel is preached most effectively not by powerful organizations that reach to every corner of the globe, but by one person passing along the good news to another—church members chatting over coffee hour; neighbors meeting at their mailboxes; parents and grandparents openly sharing what Christ has done for them.

As the little friar from Assisi often encouraged his followers: "*Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible—and suddenly you are doing the impossible!*"

Thanks be to God!

¹ Adapt. Fr. Matt, "Homily for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi," 2019 [St. Francis of Assisi Parish](https://sfoasj.com/news/fr-matts-homily-for-the-feast-of-st-francis-of-assisi), Diocese of San Jose <<https://sfoasj.com/news/fr-matts-homily-for-the-feast-of-st-francis-of-assisi>> Used with permission.

² Adapt. Pope Francis, "Homily at the Basilica of Francis on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi," 2021 [Catholic Online](https://www.catholic.org/news/international/europe/story.php?id=52625) <<https://www.catholic.org/news/international/europe/story.php?id=52625>>. Used with permission.

³ Adapt. Pope Francis, *op. cit.*

⁴ Adapt. Fr. Matt, *op. cit.*