

St. Francis
Peace, Seattle
October 5, 2014
Matthew 11:25-30

FRANCESCO

“Every heroic journey begins with good fanfare and wild hopes,” writes Richard Rohrer. “In your twenties, it feels good being the hero, putting your ladder against walls and charging ever upward, conquering this and that. But in the middle of the journey you begin to hit your limits. Heroism fails you. And you begin to realize that maybe your ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.”¹

So it was for the man we know as Saint Francis.

The Francis we’ve come to know—the holy man who embraced poverty, exuded humility, tamed wolves and preached to birds—did not begin life that way. Like many of the well-to-do young men he ran with during his youth, he was more interested in partying than in applying himself to his father’s business.

If you’d asked Francis what he wanted to be when he grew up, his answer would have been A KNIGHT. In the age of the Crusades (not unlike today) boys were captivated by the weapons, the armor, and the lure of winning a glorious name on the battlefield, and Francis was right there among them.

But his first real taste of war and the yearlong imprisonment that followed put a chink in his armor, and left him wondering if he hadn’t put his ladder against the wrong wall.

After his release he had a dream in which Christ seemed to be calling him back to the battlefield as a soldier in the pope’s army, so he procured a horse and new armor and set off for Rome. But while he was still on his way a second dream clarified the first.

“Francis,” he heard a Voice calling in the night, “who can give you greater honor, the master or the servant?” “The Master,” he replied. “Why then are you leaving the master to follow the servant?” When Francis asked, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” God told Francis: “Go back home. It will be revealed to you what you must do.”

The next morning, Francis mounted his horse and turned it back toward home.

Outside the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi a large sculpture captures that moment of turning.

- There sits Francis, the would-be knight, still arrayed in his battle armor, slumped down in his saddle, his head and that of his horse, too, drooping, their spirits dejected and downcast.
- For his dream of glory has died, and he is headed back to an uncertain future, not at all sure of how he will be greeted by family and community; and what life will hold for him there.

Once home, Francis’ life was no easier than before. But his encounters with the Divine voice continued, revealing bit by bit the Lord’s will for him, until one day, at age 26, a soul-searching Francis, kneeling in a small abandoned church outside of Assisi, prayed for guidance. And from the painted figure of Christ on the cross came the answer:

“Francis, my church is falling apart—rebuild it.”²

¹ Richard Rohrer, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola, 2010) p. 39. Ladder image comes from Thomas Merton.

² The vision happened in St. Damian’s Church, which later became the convent of the Poor Clares. The Crucifix now resides in St. Damian’s Chapel, adjacent to the Basilica of St. Clare.

Francis followed the call, and found his true vocation as a servant of Christ who, taking the gospel's teaching to heart, committed himself and his companions to a life of Christian witness through the way of poverty. He had finally found the right wall on which to set his ladder.

Last May we had the opportunity to visit Assisi to try to get closer to this saint we have long admired.

Like so many Italian towns with ancient origins, Assisi is built on a mountain with commanding views of the valley below and traces its roots back beyond Roman times to the Etruscans. The origin of its name has been contended by scholars for generations. But 21st century Seattleites can delight in one meaning of the city's ancient name Asisium — "Hawk City."

Following the advice of fellow Lutheran and travel guru Rick Steves, we began our walking tour at the highest part of the city, near the Porta Perlici, and followed the meandering streets as they twisted their way downhill toward the Basilica of St. Francis.

Near the beginning of the winding trail, just inside the city gates, there is a water line that for 20 centuries has brought water from mountain springs through a Roman aqueduct to the city and still does to this day.

Like that ancient water line, so, too, the life of St. Francis, continues to freshen the church. His ministry of peacemaking, community building, and care for God's creatures—all mediated through the most austere and simple of lifestyles—continues to find resonance in our day.

We may not hear the voice of Christ calling us in the same way or to the same tasks as Francis, but his life still challenges us to ask the question of whether our ladders are set against the right wall.

Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson made the news this week because of his off-field rather than his on-field performance. When assault charges against several NFL players brought domestic violence to the front page recently, Russell began wondering if there was any positive role he might play. As it turns out, what he had to say this last week came from a most unexpected place.

I USED TO BE A BULLY, he confessed on his new website. I USED TO BEAT PEOPLE UP.

- I THOUGHT I OWNED THE PLAYGROUND. I THOUGHT I OWNED THE CLASSROOM.
- I THOUGHT I WAS A MAN. I THOUGHT THAT WAS THE WAY TO GO.³

But at age 14, Christ got hold of Russell, and a change of direction followed.

ONCE...FAITH [WAS] IN MY LIFE, I KNEW WHAT TO FOCUS MY LIFE ON, he says.
I WAS ABLE TO START LIVING FOR OTHERS, INSTEAD OF MYSELF.

As a Super Bowl champion quarterback, he has a rare platform, and now he's using that platform to launch his "Why Not You Foundation."

"It's a place where I plan to give back," he writes, "and for my first initiative I want us to Pass the Peace to support victims of domestic violence. The idea behind Pass the Peace is simple: It's a promise. I'm sharing my love for you. I want to take care of you. I am here for you."

We may not have a platform the size and reach of Russell Wilson, but each one of us does have a platform, and more importantly, we each have the calling, given to us in baptism, to strive to make justice and peace realities in our world.

³ http://seattletimes.com/html/seahawks/2024694570_seahawks04xml.html

- That calling may lead us to serve meals at the Compass Center or to build a raft for seals.
- That calling may lead us to share smiles along with food at the food bank, or serve as a tutor or stitch together quilts or put feet to pavement on the CROP WALK.
- That calling may lead us to write a letter to our congressman or lend a hand to a stranger who needs it, or to go out of our way to be gentle with a colleague or classmate or neighbor or parent or child or friend.
- That calling may lead us to simply go about our daily lives, our giving and sharing—whatever they are—with joy.

There is nothing more we need than what we already possess to take the love which Christ has shown us and pass it around.

One of the most powerful stories from the life of St. Francis begins with three notorious thieves who inhabited the district of Monte Casale. These three, who had a reputation for brutality, knocked one day on the door of the friary to ask for some food. With Brother Francis away Brother Angelo answered the door, and, aware of how these three had been preying on others, Angelo read them the riot act and sent them on their way.

When Francis returned, Angelo, feeling quite proud of himself, told Francis how he'd gotten rid of the thieves. But rather than congratulating Angelo, Francis reproved him:

“Sinners are brought back to God far better by kindness than by cruel reproofs,” said Francis.

“For our Lord Jesus Christ said it is the sick, not the well, who need a physician, and that he had not come to call the just, but sinners to repentance.”

Francis sent Angelo out the door with the bread and wine Francis had just obtained, with orders to track down the thieves, beg their forgiveness, give them the food, and beseech them to honor God and offend their neighbors no more.

Brother Angelo did as he was told, and not long after his return, they heard knocking again on the friary door. It was the three bandits. The humility of Brother Angelo and the generosity of Brother Francis had penetrated the thick walls around their souls. They wanted a different life and they got one: Francis admitted them into the order and they became part of the community of little Brothers.

If the life of St. Francis teaches us anything, it's that our lives are in process, and we have a patient Lord. A Lord who calls to us:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and 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.”

As we come to his Table this morning it is this Lord who greets us, he who is himself “cook, servant, food and drink.” (Luther) He offers us forgiveness for our past, nourishment for our present needs, and a commission to go from here to join with the ministry of Francis and all God's people in proclaiming and living as the body of Christ in the world.

Taste and see that the Lord is good! God's mercy endures forever!

Amen.