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St. Francis Sunday
Peace, Seattle
October 7, 2018
Matthew 11:25-30

LEARNING A NEW TUNE

Above the lower altar in the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi, is a fresco by Giotto di Bondone which depicts the wedding between St. Francis and Lady Poverty.[1] Her threadbare dress is a patchwork of tattered cloth; the bottom of her gown is obscured by briars and thorns. Bondone portrays that moment when Francis slips a ring onto her outstretched finger.

The eyes in Lady Poverty's gaunt face gaze intently—even intensely—at Francis, as if to say, ARE YOU SURE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GETTING INTO?—while Francis returns her gaze with calm equanimity, his answer an unqualified YES.

Inhabiting the space between Francis and Lady Poverty stands Christ, the presider, who looks at Francis while supporting Poverty's extended arm. It is he who gives away this bride, and the message is clear: this union is my will, too.

The fresco captures that moment when, as Richard Rohr puts it, Francis changed sides.[2]

The world in which Francis was born in 1181 was obsessed with war, fear, and security. Europe and the Muslim world had already endured two crusades. The third crusade began when Francis was a boy, and the fourth when he was twenty-one.[3]

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.

His father Pietro, a successful cloth merchant, had a thriving business that enabled him to give Francis the best things money could buy—including a custom made suit of armor, a fully outfitted horse, and all the accoutrements for battle.

But Francis's first real taste of war in neighboring Perugia, and the yearlong imprisonment that followed, put a chink in that armor, and a subsequent dream caused him to doubt whether his life was moving in the right direction.

"Francis," he heard a Voice call to him in a dream, "Go back home. It will be revealed to you what you must do." The next morning, Francis, defeated and careworn, mounted his horse and turned it back toward Assisi.

Outside that same Basilica in Assisi is a sculpture that captures that moment of turning.[4]

- 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 how he will be greeted by family and community; and what life will hold for him there.

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[1] The observations about the fresco by Giotto di Bondone's allegory are mine. You can find adetail from the full fresco HERE.
[2] You can find the fresco detail, along with commentary by Richard Rohr, here: https://cac.org/voluntary-poverty-2017-06-07/ Rohr, a Franciscan, is a main source for this sermon. During June of 2017 he wrote a series on St. Francis and Franciscan Spirituality, which can be found at the Center for Contemplation Website. My sermon borrows from that series of meditations, as well as my personal experience while in Assisi in June 2014.
[3] Richard Rohr, Center for Contemplation, June 7, 2017 http://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/A7B1BCD9A13F2338/281C5472D20A0A9DC67FD2F38AC4859C
[4] A photo of the sculpture can be found HERE. The interpretation is mine.

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When he arrived home, Francis found that the people, the activities, and the material things that once gave him pleasure did so no longer. In their place he discovered a rekindled faith beckoning him to imitate Jesus and bind himself to a new center.

Francis saw that once you felt you owned anything, then you would have to protect it and increase it. He saw the intrinsic connection between violence and the need to protect one's possessions and privileges.

His own father was one of the first generation of propertied businessmen in the newly emerging trading class of Europe and there is evidence that he was buying up the lands of the poor.[5] Francis recognized that his father's obsession with money had in many ways destroyed his father's soul. And he concluded that the only way out of such a world was to live a life of voluntary poverty. So Francis set out on a radically different path.[6]

Instead of staying with his family in upper Assisi where he had been raised, Francis moved down—literally—not to lower Assisi where the lower classes hung out, but even further down, onto the plain below Assisi, where a colony of lepers, misfits, and those deemed unacceptable, unworthy, or shameful, lived out their miserable lives.

It was there on that plain, in an abandoned and ruined church, that Francis heard Christ's voice telling him, REBUILD MY CHURCH.

Francis publicly renounced his inheritance and all the perks that came with it, and joined himself to Lady Poverty instead. Poverty became his lens for seeing everything. He learned to read reality through the eyes of those who have suffered and been rejected—and who, with Jesus, came out resurrected.[7]

His plea that God would make him an instrument of God's peace endures as one of the great prayers in the tradition of the West. It proclaims the upside down-ness of God's framing story, all the while remaining acutely personal—LORD, MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE…

One is never done, never completes the inner work and outer actions implied by this prayer. LORD, MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE…

I have a feeling that when Francis first uttered that prayer, it sounded a lot rougher than it does now.

I have a feeling that when the man who hung out with the destitute, with beggars and lepers, the sick and dying first prayed that prayer, the words didn't line up symmetrically, didn't come out poetically.

I have a feeling that the prayer we've come to know as HIS prayer emerged from the soil of injustice, tragedy, and conundrum—ones he'd witnessed and ones he'd experienced first hand.

And I have a feeling that, over time, this prayer grew layer-by-layer, heartache-by-heartache, until it embodied as fully as words can the calling Francis felt to the very marrow of his soul: to be God's humble servant.

In the eight centuries since his death, Francis has become what some call a "prime attractor," a person who moves history and humanity forward just by being who he is.[8]

[5] Richard Rohr.
[6] Richard Rohr, Center for Contemplation, June 7, 2017 http://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/A7B1BCD9A13F2338/281C5472D20A0A9DC67FD2F38AC4859C
[7] Richard Rohr.
[8] Richard Rohr, Center for Contemplation, June 5, 2017.

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In the aftermath of the most divisive Supreme Court nomination process in a generation, and in the midst of an election cycle in which battle lines are dug deep and wide, we all could use a good dose of St. Francis calling us back to center; pointing us to the Christ who calls us to conversion and promises rest for all this struggling, burdened world.

The world in which we live, like the one Francis knew, is still obsessed with war, fear, and security. Our world, like his, still struggles mightily with responsibility for the poor, the homeless, and the disenfranchised, and with the call to live simply and generously with Earth our sister, our mother, our home.

Never pointing to himself, but rather to Christ, Francis found his hope in the one who emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, who poured his life out on the cross, and who meets us in the bread and wine, offering his lifeblood for forgiveness and for the healing of this whole broken world.

The issues and challenges facing our families, our nation and world don't magically disappear when we meet Christ here, but the grace and spirit with which he grounds us rekindles in us the desire to practice loving and caring and forgiving, one day at a time.

Amen.