

The Feast of St. Francis
October 4, 2020
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“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

These weeks are hard, aren't they? If you have a furry friend within reach, give'm a squeeze, pat, scratch, whatever they prefer. Our animal companions help us remember, don't they? Remember what is truly important: food, water, exercise, attention, affection. Today is our patronal feast, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, one of the very best that our tradition has yet to produce.

I think G.K. Chesterton's book is my favorite one on St. Francis, but the image I really have of him is from Franco Zeffirelli's 1972 film “Brother Sun, Sister Moon.” Donovan did the soundtrack... How could you go wrong?

There is a scene that has Francesco and his band of mendicant monks walking through the streets begging food. It was pouring rain, they were barefoot, dressed in tattered robes. Here is that scene _____.

Isn't that striking? An aspect of St. Francis and his way is intentional poverty. In this scene, the poverty was harsh, the conditions were wretched, but were the *poverellos* miserable? Didn't look like it to me. They were challenged, of course, but in that challenge they were invigorated, they helped each other through it. The practice of poverty put them in touch with suffering, allowed them to share in the suffering of others. That is *very different* from involuntary poverty, which is a sin, not for the poor, but those who made them so or allowed them to remain so. But what Francis practiced was different. The honesty of their endeavor was terribly hard, but did it seem worth it to them? Did it bring them into better relationship with their world? Indeed. Francis, maybe more than any other saint, lived fully embodied in the world, understood fully the incarnational nature of God in Christ. This knowledge made him fully conscious of the heights of joy and the depths of suffering in this world, and taught him the appropriate human reaction to this all: gratitude.

The world! Today more obviously than usual, there is suffering in the world, so much suffering, so much loss and brokenness, fear and hatred, violence, sickness unto death. The virus has made it into the center of the executive branch, our president is ill. This is no good in an already chaotic season. At precisely the same time there is such beauty and grace, so many occasions for joy, such goodness in our fellow creatures and the whole creation itself.

I love the snow. It happened infrequently in Eugene, *maybe* one good snow a year. And I loved it! I mean, SNOW! At same time, Windy was heavily involved in managing a cold weather shelter emergency homeless shelter. The parish hosted one of the sites, and I was involved, too, and knew up close the hardship of winter weather on the homeless, the physical pain wandering around all day in slush until the doors opened at 7:00, not being able to find a dry place to even sit down. Homelessness is cruel any time of year, and it is worse in winter. Fatally worse far too often. And I love the snow.

There is a poem Windy sent to me years ago by a Unitarian pastor named Richard Gilbert that opens this dilemma a bit. It is called “To savor the world, or save it.”

I rise in the morning torn between the desire
To save the world or to savor it—to serve life or to enjoy it;
To savor the sweet taste of my own joy
Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor;
To celebrate life with exuberant step
Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden.
What am I to do when the guilt at my bounty
Clouds the sky of my vision;
When the glow which lights my every day
Illumines the hurting world around me?
To savor the world or save it?
God of justice, if such there be,
Take from me the burden of my question.
Let me praise my plenitude without limit;
Let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk!
No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears
To the cries of the hurt and the hungry;
You will not close my eyes to the sight of the afflicted.
What is that you say?
To save, one must serve?
To savor, one must save?

The one will not stand without the other?
Forgive me—in my preoccupation with myself,
In my concern for my own life
I had forgotten.
Forgive me, God of justice,
Forgive me, and make me whole.

A local boy, in his own way, says the same thing. E.B. White wrote, “It’s hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to

enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

Yes it does.

How do we enjoy our lives in the midst of suffering? How do we appreciate the blessings while not ignoring the curses? How do we enjoy the sweetness of our own cup and not forget the bitterness of our neighbors’?

I think Francis and Pastor Gilbert are *sympatico* here. When Francis and his friends walked in that rain, do you think they were cold? Hungry? If I kept playing that scene one of the *poverellos* saw a woman and was filled with desire. Did they deny those feelings, ignore them, those uncomfortable feelings? No. And yet they persisted.

Another aspect of Francis’ haigiography has to do with animals. Likely this arose because he invented the living nativity scene. But I think the broader association comes from his appreciation of the fullness of life. The joys and sorrows of existence, and our lives with animals is a window into the mystery of life. Inviting animals into our lives is not easy. We are just out of puppyhood with Pippin and Merri, our cattle dogs— thanks be to God. Our patience and checkbook have been challenged by their presence in our lives. And the chickens are complicated, the ducks are outrageous, goats are endearing. (We anticipate goats arriving in spring). One of the cats lost half his tail, another has a compulsive eating problem and the other a bum bladder. Our animals usually die before we do. They ruin things, pee on things, chew on things, embarrass with their licking and sniffing and leg-hugging; they bite other animals or us; they murder their way through the little brown bird population, and they fill gaps in our lives, gaps that need filling. And trukly, they remind us of the vitality, the anarchic vitality of life.

And, de-Nile is not just a river in Egypt. Denial is one of the chief sins of our species. Denial about the severity of this pandemic threatens to topple a president, has sown chaos across this nation and has cost tens of thousands of lives, needlessly. Good news that is lies is easier to deliver than bad news that is true, that’s for sure. But does that help? Denial about how poor some of our neighbors, how hard it is for people maybe right across the street, makes it easier to sleep in our high and luxurious beds, but the damage it does to the fabric of our society! The harm it does to our own moral substance!

And so does ignoring a day when the winds and tides are perfect for a sojourn out on the Reach. It is blasphemy to not drop your jaw in wonder at the beauty of your 7th or your 97th annual changing of the leaves. We violate the laws of God and nature when we do not enjoy good food, fine craftsmanship, works of creativity and wonder by our fellow human beings. Jesus came into

this world, signifying that it is important to God, and blessing the Creation with His blessed presence. Our responsibility is to care for these gifts, ensure they are shared by all, and enjoy the stuffing out of it.

How? With all of this, how do we enjoy the blessings without ignoring the work left to be done and the horror that envelopes us? I think Francis would approve of Pastor Gilbert's prescription "To save, one must serve? / To savor, one must save?" We must savor. The world would be beautiful even if no human ever saw or smelled or tasted or touched it, but since we do those things, our responsibility is to conserve it, enjoy it and be grateful. This is one of the ways that we love God.

But the great commandment also tells us that to be fully alive, to apply our God-like image to our lives, we must love our neighbors as our selves. And we love with the movements of our hearts, surely, in our prayer, obviously, but as Francis said, "Preach the gospel ceaselessly, use words when necessary." Preaching the Gospel, as Francis means it (and Jesus for that matter), means spreading the love of God by spreading our love of neighbor. And love is conveyed as much in a heartfelt sentiment spoken aloud as it is in a well-made sandwich, as a warm bed on a cold night for one who lacks that, a calm port in a raging storm, be it a blow coming over the Camden Hills or the tumultuousness of a global pandemic.

To love this world and all we share it with, to be a good and loving parent/child/spouse/partner/friend/pet owner, to love God in Christ with the Holy Spirit, with our heart and mind and body, we need to do what we can. Do what you can! Serve how you can serve! Now what we can do varies wildly from person to person; it varies wildly from one season of our own lives to another. But what is expected of us, as neighbors, as citizens, and church members, as human beings is to give as much as we can to those who need what we have. Some of us have time to give, effort and energy. Others have ideas, expertise, skills. Some of us have other resources: money, land, an old car to NPR. Maybe all you have to lend is an ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on, a heart that is open. So long as you are giving all you can, you are there, and you will begin to understand what Francis meant when he prayed,

O Divine Master, grant that I may
Not so much seek to be consoled as to console
To be understood, as to understand
To be loved, as to love
For it is in giving that we receive
And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned

And it's in dying that we are born to Eternal Life
Amen

Jesus gave until He died. That is the goal, or the expectation, really. "Take up your cross and follow me," isn't that how He put it? Francis did pretty well to that end, he certainly gave until it hurt, a lot, it would seem. And yourself? How is your blessings given/received balance sheet? Only you know what you have to give. Be it in our annual giving campaign, to Healthy Peninsula and their good works, to the library or a school foundation, to the neighbor lady down the street, or your children having a hard time across the country, or the stranger whose needs show up on your doorstep on a Tuesday morning, give what you can.

And it is all of this, the dog at your feet, the cat on your lap, the friend across the table or the bed or across town or the sea, we can savor the beauty, goodness and love as we serve others. And our service is done by the grace of God, grace which we find in the beauty, goodness and love in that very same creation. What an elegant system this all is. Give that you may receive. Forgive that you may be forgiven. Die that you might live. "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." AMEN