

“Yes, and it’s the Feast of St. Francis”

Oct 4th, 2020 (Covid 29 – Live Stream 5)
Mathew 6: 25-34

Rev. Kimberly Heath
(Live and In-Person) Wall Street Church

Today is World Wide Communion Sunday. As you can see from the Communion Table we are not set up for Communion. Communion needs to be done very carefully in Covid times because we can’t pass the elements, and coming forward and receiving has its challenges too. So for now we are holding off on communion for the morning service.

It is one more thing Covid has taken. Anyone else getting tired with the pandemic? This week my youngest had a ‘sniffly’ nose so I of course kept her home from school. I called the place where she does riding lessons and told them she would have to miss the day’s lesson. I was told she would have to miss for two weeks after any cold symptoms... for an outdoor riding lesson. Aye yiy!

I mean I get it-- we need to be so careful, but kids get sniffles and recover from sniffles so quickly. I feel like I keep having to bite my tongue from saying ‘yes but...’ all the time. I want to say “yes I understand there is a pandemic, and I understand we and you have to have protocols *but, but,* let’s be reasonable, in this case couldn’t we make an exception?”

I don’t doubt that we could spend some quite a long time telling our ‘yes but’ pandemic stories; where our back goes up and we just resist what we are told. The loss of communion or a riding lesson is pretty small fries. Some of you have more painful stories of not being able to get together with family for Thanksgiving or not able to visit someone in hospital. It’s been hard and our grief easily turns to frustration and anger.

In addition to being World Wide Communion Sunday, it is also the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi. Did you know that? You may have, especially those who are Catholic in background.

St. Francis is one of the most venerated saints in the Catholic Church. As evidenced by the number of schools and churches named after him. (Although some are named after St. Francis Xavier who was named after the original St. Francis).

St. Francis was born in 1181 or 1182 and lived in Assis, near Rome in Italy. He was born into a wealthy family. His father was a silk merchant. He lived the high



life and enjoyed every moment of it as a youth. They say he was handsome, witty, gallant, and loved wearing fine, bright clothes. He spent money lavishly. Sounds like a bit of a typical teen from a privileged family if you ask me.

Francis experienced a 'conversion' so that the second half of his life was radically changed from the first half. This conversion was not in one instant—like Paul on the road to Damascus—but instead it came through a few significant times in his life. I think most of us have conversions that are over time though not many do a 180 the way Francis did where he totally changed his life and gave up his life of wealth and power for a life of poverty and simplicity.

One of the things that helped to change him was that he went on one of the crusades and during that time he was kidnapped and held captive for a year. He was ill for much of it and that gave him some time to think. Hard times in life can help you to see what matters in life more clearly. When he returned, he increasingly had a heart for the poor. In one incident when he was selling his father's silk in the market a beggar came by asking for alms – for some money. As soon as Francis finished up a sale he ran after the beggar and gave him all the coins in his pockets. His father was enraged.

In another significant incident, he was worshiping in a church in San Domiano, just outside of Assisi, and he had a vision in which the icon of the crucified Christ said to him, "*Francis, Francis, go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins.*" That particular church building was in rough shape so Francis understood it to mean literally repair this church. He went and sold much of his father's silk stock and gave the money to the priest. The priest understood this was essentially stolen money and refused to take it.

Fearing his father's wrath, he went and hid in a cave for a month. He was right to be afraid of his father because when he came back, hungry and dirty; he was dragged home by his father; beaten, bound, and locked in a small storeroom. His mother set him free when her husband was away on business. Francis then found shelter in a church with the protection of a local priest. When his father returned, he took his Francis to court and threatened to cut him out of the inheritance. At that point Francis totally renounced his inheritance. The story goes that he stripped himself of the clothes that he was wearing and that a priest covered him with his cloak.

He never looked back. He lived as a beggar, often begging for stones so he could physically rebuild the church. He embraced this life and rebuilt several small chapels that were falling into ruin. He also began caring for those who had Leprosy near Assisi. He is said to have had a great love for

the birds and all of creation and became able to see the divine in every living thing.

Francis was a very humble and a very likable guy. He was filled with joy. He renounced the things of the world that most of us seek after but he didn't do it in a moralistic way. He didn't judge the world he just seemed to invite people to live differently.

Soon he had a few followers who were inspired by his example. In 1209 he composed a simple rule for his followers, the *Regula primitiva* or "Primitive Rule", which really was just a bunch of verses from the New Testament. When he sent this off to Rome, the Pope looked at it and said, "This is no Rule of Life. This is just the Gospel." But in some ways that was the point for Francis, you didn't need anything more. For him the rule was "To follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and to walk in his footsteps". .

I often read and quote Richard Rohr who called Francis a conservative. This is what he said: "Both Jesus and Francis were "conservatives" in the true sense of the term, they conserved what was worth conserving—the core, the transformative life of the Gospel—and did not let accidentals get in the way."

Of course, this ends up looking very radical, because most of us let 'accidentals' get in the way all the time. We sweat the small stuff. This is the thing about Francis' life that seems so remarkable, his life was one of letting go of anything earthly and as he did he gained heaven – not just that eternal someday heaven, but heaven on earth. He gave up all possessions, comfort, he gave up status, and his pride. And he seemed so much happier for it! That amazes me.

We had someone at a Celebrate Life evening service a few weeks ago tell us that they had been defrauded of a large sum of money. The person has been so transformed by the faith in Jesus, that they have let it go. Sometimes I don't quite believe stories like that, but in this case I really did. I'm not sure I can imagine that level of trusting in God. It's humbling. It's beautiful. Can you imagine the freedom?

We've had so much taken from us during this pandemic – even without it, I'm sure you have some challenging parts in your life that just make you frustrated or angry, that just make you want to argue and resist saying 'yes, but!'

I did a lot of drama in high school. In fact, I was a student of the famous thespian, Lisa Leroux! I was on the improv team for a while and one of the most important rules of improv is the 'yes, and' rule. Improv is drama with no script. You're often given a scenario or a couple of props but

basically, you're making it all up as you go along. But one of the key rules is that for it to work you have to go along with whatever has been presented. If someone says "Oh darn it's starting to rain!", you can't say "no it isn't", because that just kills the momentum. You always have to respond with "yes, and ...". "Yes and, look I brought my rubber ducky so we can play in the puddles!" or something like that. The rule of improv is that you have to take what is given to you and instead of resisting it you go with it.

That rule is fun in an improv game but the truth is it's a good rule to have in life, even when life is as hard as it is now. St. Francis gave us a model for how to do that. Preserve the core of what matters – which for him was the gospel and the transforming love of Jesus—and let everything else go. When you are that rooted in Jesus and find your security and your self-worth in Jesus then you can handle and accept the storms and the disruptions of life.

We often say the Serenity Prayer around here. What's the first line in the prayer? *God grant me the serenity to accept the things we cannot change.* So much of life, so much of this pandemic, needs that radical acceptance, instead of pointless resistance. When you do accept what you can't change you have so much more peace in your life. You can live lighter and have more joy. Some things do need resistance. There are things we are called to change and make a difference in.

Francis seemed to understand what he could change, which was mostly inside himself, and in doing what he felt directly called to do, like pick up stones to build a church. But it is interesting that as he changed himself and embraced suffering and poverty, he ended up changing the whole church. He really did rebuild the church and not just some small falling down chapels, he had a massive impact on the church that continues to this day.

The current pope, who I think is wonderful, was greatly inspired by St. Francis – that's why he so took on his name when he became the pope. (By the way, if you are looking for an uplifting movie, I recommend you watch "The Two Popes". It is on Netflix. The current pope really is like his name sake).

In these days where life feels complex, frightening and so beyond our control I pray that we may root ourselves deeply in the Gospel of Jesus and that we may hold everything else lightly and embrace a simplicity of seeing the face of Jesus in every person, and even in every part of creation. Thanks be to God.

Let's listen to the prayer of St. Francis:

Make Me a Channel of Your Peace

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there is hatred, let me bring Your love
Where there is injury, Your pardon Lord
And where there's doubt, true faith in You.

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light
And where there's sadness, ever joy.

Oh Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul.

Make me a channel of Your peace
It is pardoning that we are pardoned
In giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we're born to eternal life.

Oh Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul.

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light
And where there's sadness, ever joy.