

Luke 17:5-10

5The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. 7"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? 8Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 9Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

This morning I'm going to do something I rarely do. Yesterday, Oct. 4th, is the day the church sets aside to remember St. Francis of Assisi who lived in the 12th century. St. Francis is well known for his love of animals and yesterday we had a "blessing of the animals" to remind us of God's gift of animals and our responsibility to care for them and all of God's creation. But St. Francis was much more than an animal lover, he was a powerful witness to God's love in action. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession encourages us to remember St. Francis and other saints for two reasons: (1) Hearing or reading of their faith strengthens our faith and (2) Their lives inspire us to imitate their example of holy living.

Growing up Francis enjoyed a privileged, easy life because of his father's wealth as a cloth merchant and the permissive nature of France at that time. From the beginning everyone -- and I mean everyone -- loved him. Francis had an infectious smile and a charming personality. His contemporaries note that he was constantly happy. Nothing would bother him or bring him down. Whatever his faults people were all too willing to overlook them. He was a picky eater, people excused him. When he was ill, they flocked to take care of him. He was forever day-dreaming and did poorly in school, but no one minded it. Everyone considered Francis to be their best friend. In many ways his life was too easy for his own good. For no one tried to correct him. No one took the time to guide him. He lived his life in simple terms and took everything he heard or read literally. For Francis everything was black and white. In life there were no gray areas.

As a teen Francis led a crowd of young people who spent their nights in wild parties. His biographer wrote, "he attracted to himself a whole group of young people who were addicted to evil and accustomed to vice."

Francis was also ambitious. He wanted more than what money could buy. He longed for fame, notoriety, and respect from those of noble birth and high society. He became convinced that the only way for him to receive what he so intensely desired was to prove himself in battle. He didn't have to wait long. A small army was formed in Assisi to overthrow a neighboring village.

However, things didn't go as planned. Most of the troops from Assisi were butchered in the fight. Only those wealthy enough to bring in a good ransom were spared and taken prisoner. At last Francis found himself among the nobility all-but chained and in a harsh, dark dungeon. All accounts report that even here Francis never lost his happy disposition and after spending a year in the dungeon, he was ransomed. Returning home he picked up where he left off, partying with as much joy and abandon as he had before.

Yet he still longed for glory. It wasn't long before the Pope put out a call for knights to serve in the Fourth Crusade. This was his chance but before he went he needed a suit of armor and a horse -- no problem for a young man with a wealthy father. Swelling with pride, his father spared no expense and outfitted Francis with a magnificent coat of armor decorated with pure gold and fitted him with a jeweled studded magnificent cloak. Francis vowed to all who would listen that he would return a prince.

But Francis never got farther than one day's ride from Assisi. There he had a dream and in the dream God told him he had it all wrong. God told him to return home. So he went back home—never enduring the hardship of a warrior or even getting close to gaining honor in battle. Now the young man who wanted nothing more than to be praised and honored by all found himself humiliated, laughed at, called a coward by the entire village, and raged on by his father for the embarrassment and scorn he brought upon the family name. Not to mention the small fortune his father wasted on his armor.

Francis' turn toward God and away from the world did not happen overnight. God had waited for him for twenty-five years and now it was Francis' turn to wait. Laughed at by the people at home and rejected by his father, Francis spent more and more time alone in the woods and in prayer. He was convinced that God was calling him but he had no idea what for. Retiring to a cave at times he wept profusely for his sins. At other times he was overwhelmed by God's grace bringing him unimaginable joy.

One day riding through the countryside, Francis, the man who loved beauty, who was finicky about cleanliness, and picky about food, came face to face with a leper. Repelled by the appearance and the smell of the leper, Francis, overwhelmed with compassion, jumped off his horse and kissed the hand of

the deformed leper. When his kiss of peace was returned, Francis was filled with pure joy. As he rode off, he turned around for one last wave, but the leper had disappeared. From that moment on he was convinced this was a test from God...that he had passed.

His search for God led him to a run down church at San Damiano. While he was praying there, he heard the voice of Jesus on the crucifix speak to him, "Francis" the voice said, "repair my church." Francis—taking the words literally—assumed Jesus was speaking of the crumbling church building he was in. Acting on impulse he returned home, grabbed some fabric from his father's shop and sold it for funds to repair the church.

His father was furious -- together with Francis' cowardliness as a soldier and his growing disinterest in the business he had seen enough. Filled with rage his father dragged Francis before the bishop demanding Francis return the money and publicly renounce all rights as heir to his father's fortune.

The bishop promptly dismissed his father and spoke kindly to Francis; he told him to return the money and he assured Francis that God would provide for his every need. Then in the presence of his father, the bishop, and the towns people who assembled there he gave back the money and stripped off his clothes--clothes his father had given him--and said to all, "Pietro Bernardone is no longer my father. From now on I can say with complete freedom, 'Our Father' who art in heaven. Wearing nothing but castoff rags, he walked off barefoot into the freezing woods--singing joyfully. Later robbers beat him and took what little clothes he had. When he regained his strength, he climbed out of the ditch and went off singing again. From that moment on Francis had nothing...and everything.

Francis went back to what he considered to be God's call. He begged for stones and rebuilt the San Damiano church with his own hands, not realizing that it was the Church with a capital C that God wanted repaired. Scandal and greed were tearing apart the Catholic Church from the inside while outside heresies flourished.

Soon Francis started preaching in a very simple way. He urged any who would listen to return to a love for God and for his church. Francis knew about the worldliness and greed among the clergy within the church. Everyone knew about it, talked about it, and grumbled about it...but Francis always remained humble and showed the Church and its people his utmost respect. When someone told him of a priest who was openly living in sin with a woman Francis went to the priest, knelt before him, and kissed his hands -- when the priest asked him why he was doing this Francis replied, "because these hands hold the sacrament, the very body of Christ."

Slowly people began to be attracted to Francis. They wanted to follow his life. Sleeping in the open, begging for garbage to eat...and loving God. With a growing number of new companions, Francis knew he had to give them some direction. Turning to the Bible he read the command of Jesus to the rich young man to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. Then he read the words of Jesus to the apostles that they are to take nothing on their journey. Finally, he came across Jesus' words when he said, "take up your cross and follow me." "Here is our rule," Francis said to his companions. He was determined to do what no one thought possible--to live by the Gospel. Francis took these commands so literally that when a thief stole his hood he made one brother track down the thief. When the thief came before Francis he gave him his robe also.

Francis never wanted to establish a religious order. That just happened. He thought what he was doing was an expression of God's brotherhood. His companions came from all walks of life, from fields and towns, nobility and common people, universities, the Church, and the merchant class. Francis was never impressed with status. He practiced true equality by showing equal honor, respect, and love to every person whether they were beggar or pope.

Francis' concept of brotherhood include all of God's creation. Much has been written about Francis' love of nature but it was deeper than that. Francis believed that nature, every part of God's creation, played a vital part in God's plan of redemption. He once said, "A sparrow is as much my brother as the pope.

In one story, it is said 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 tells us birds stood still when he walked among them, only flying off when he said they could leave.

Another story tells of a wolf that had been killing livestock and frightening villagers. When Francis heard that the town wanted to kill the wolf he intervened by talking first to the wolf and then to the townspeople. The wolf became the village pet of the townspeople cared for him and made sure the wolf always had plenty to eat.

Following the Gospel literally, Francis and his companions went out to preach two by two. At first, people were understandably hostile to these men in rags trying to talk to them about God's love. People even ran from them for fear they'd catch this strange madness! And they were right. Because soon these same people noticed that these barefoot beggars wearing potato sacks seemed to always be filled with constant joy. They celebrated life. And

people had to ask themselves: Could one own nothing and be happy? Soon those who had once met them with mud and rocks, greeted them with bells and smiles.

Francis never tried to abolish poverty, he lived to make it holy. When his friars met someone poorer than they, they would eagerly rip off the sleeve of their habit and give to the person they encountered. They worked for all necessities and only begged if they had to. But Francis would not let them accept any money. He told them to treat coins as if they were pebbles in the road. When the bishop expressed horror at the friars' hard life, Francis countered with, "If we had any possessions we'd need weapons and laws to defend them."

Possessing something was the death of love for Francis. Also, Francis reasoned, what could you do to a man who owns nothing? You can't rob him. You can't starve a fasting man, you can't steal from someone who has no money, you can't ruin someone's reputation who hates prestige. Francis and his followers were truly free.

Francis was a person of action. His simplicity of life moved from an idea to deeds. If there was a simple way, no matter how impossible it seemed, Francis would take it. So when Francis wanted approval for his brotherhood, he went straight to Rome to see Pope Innocent III. You can imagine what the pope thought when this beggar approached him! As a matter of fact he had his guards throw Francis out. But then the pope became obsessed with a dream that this tiny man in rags held up the church, so he quickly called Francis back and gave him permission to preach.

Sometimes this direct approach led to mistakes that he corrected with the same spontaneity that he made them. Once he ordered a brother who hesitated to speak because he stuttered to go preach half-naked. When Francis realized how his words had hurt someone he loved he ran to town, stopped the brother, took off his own robe, gave it to the brother, and to save him from embarrassment preached for him instead.

Francis acted quickly and impulsively because he acted from the heart before his head could tell him it's a bad idea. Like the time when he decided to travel to Syria to convert the Moslems. A crazy thought on its own but this idea came to him while the Fifth Crusade was being fiercely fought. In the middle of a raging battle, Francis decided to go straight to the sultan to make peace. He was unarmed and unprotected when he and his companion were captured, the real miracle was that they weren't killed instantly. Instead Francis was taken to the sultan where he spoke to him of the love of Jesus. The sultan was stricken by Francis' words and the humble way he

presented himself. After hearing his Christian witness the sultan told Francis, "I would convert to your religion which is a beautiful one -- but if I did both of us would be murdered. My life matters little but yours must continue. Go in peace."

Francis did find persecution of a kind -- not among the Moslems, but among his own brothers. When he returned to Italy, he came back to a brotherhood that had grown to over 5000 men. Pressure came from the church to control this great movement, to make it conform to the standards of other religious orders. His dream of radical poverty was too harsh, people said. Francis responded by turning to prayer saying out loud, "Lord, didn't I tell you they wouldn't trust you?"

Rather than fight this battle he gave up his authority in the order that bore his name. He did willingly. He was relieved and wasn't upset about it in the least. Now he was just another brother, like he'd always wanted.

Francis' final years were filled with physical suffering. Years of poverty, living out in the open, and wandering had made Francis ill. When he began to go blind, the pope ordered that his eyes be operated on. This was the 12th century and it meant cauterizing his face with a hot branding iron. Francis spoke to "Brother Fire": "Brother Fire" he said, "the Most High has made you strong and beautiful and useful. Be courteous to me now in this hour, for I have always loved you, temper your heat so that I can endure it." And as Francis reported it. "Brother Fire had been so kind that I felt nothing at all."

Francis endured the branding iron but he never recovered from this illness. He died on October 4, 1226 at the age of 45. Francis is the founder of the Franciscan order that still exists today. He has made us aware that God loves, embraces, and extends his redemptive work to include all of his creation: be it human, animal, plants and the entire natural world.

St. Francis of Assisi was, and continues to be, a blessing from God. My favorite quote from his is one when he was addressing a group of his followers. "Go into the world and preach the gospel" he said. "Preach the gospel...and when necessary, use words." Amen.