

St. Francis, October 4, 2020

✚ St. Francis took that passage from Galatians to heart. He had grown up in a wealthy and powerful family – raised to inherit lands, wealth and title, along with the power that went with it. I won't go into his whole story right now, but in short, his life was changed by encountering Jesus in the person of a leper begging for alms. He gave up everything that was of value to him and to the society in which he lived up to that point – even to the point of stripping naked in the town square and walking away from it all.

✚ He came to “*boast of [nothing] except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” He came to understand that in Christ, the world itself is crucified and a new creation is born. Living this

new creation cost him everything in the old one. He endured hardships, hostility, hunger, political wrangling, dissent within the ranks of those who followed him. His body, he even said bore the marks of Christ's crucifixion – the stigmata – on his hands and feet.

✚ Yet, through all of that, he knew the peace of Christ; he knew the love of God and he was so filled with that love that it flowed from him to his neighbours in this “old creation”. He was Christ for those who encountered him and as with Jesus, where he went, people were fed and clothed and healed and lifted up – given hope and new life.

✚ He gathered others around him who formed a community of brothers and sisters (later known as Franciscans) whose mission was to be with and to love and serve the poor, the sick, the lonely – the lowliest of society. That movement, of course, continues today with both lay and ordained members of the Society of St. Francis.

✚ Today is the last day in the Season of Creation in the Church. I have spoken in the past few weeks a lot about this planet earth that we call home: this amazing piece of God's creation. Francis had a great love for the world - for natural beauty and for animals, but he also had a passion for people. We too are an amazing piece of God's creation. Like the earth, we too,

are hurting and through the lens of St. Francis, I want to consider our beauty and our pain.

✚ First, we are no less amazing and beautiful than any plant, animal or sunset. As a species, we are extraordinary in our intelligence, our capacity to adapt, to create beauty ourselves as we reflect something of the glory of God in the arts, in acts of compassion and in a deep yearning to love and to be loved. The people who told stories about us in ancient Israel thought of us as being created by God in the image and likeness of our creator. Over and over again, scriptures – and not just Jewish and Christian scriptures – tell us that humanity is good, of infinite value and beauty – that every human life is priceless. We are not the lords of

creation, but an integral and beautiful piece of it.

✚ I think Francis, who loved people, offers us humans a few lessons for today, and they are lessons that address the state of the world right now. Between COVID, massive climate change events taking place, social unrest around the globe – not the least of which is happening in our closest neighbour, the United States - with all that seems to be going wrong right now, we are living with a heightened sense of anxiety and fear in our lives.

✚ I think that Francis, in the way he lived his life, modelled for us what it is to follow Jesus; which is not a way into bliss, into wealth and luxury and comfort and worldly power, but a

way that says: “if you want to fully become the perfect and beautiful creature that God has made you to be, then let go of the things that hold you back. If it is wealth and clinging to the false sense of security it brings with it that holds you back being fully human, then let it go. It turns out that that in general, the more wealth you have beyond simply enough to live on, the less likely you are to be happy in life. If it is power that you cling to, in the mistaken belief that it will give you some control over life – then let it go. I hope that COVID has taught us that lesson. Even the rich and powerful are subject to nature.

✚ I can imagine a scenario like this for Francis. Here’s this wealthy young playboy, ready to take on the world – but he’s not very happy:

wine, women and song just don't fulfil him. He comes across a poor leper – cast out of society and begging for enough to get by on for just one more day. Something in him shatters and he feels an unfamiliar compassion, so he gets off his horse, and gives the man some money and a hug – a forbidden and dangerous hug that could infect him with the same disease.

✚ I imagine his confusion over the next few days. What does all of this mean? His compassionate and loving heart has been opened up, but he can't just leave his wealth and responsibilities to his family and follow this strange urging to love that has awoken within him. Then I imagine him coming across the gospel passage we just heard: *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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.”

✚ Francis was invited by the Christ in that leper's eyes to find happiness in life: to find his fulfillment as a human being. You might think it was a long drawn out and difficult thing for Francis to turn his life around so drastically in order to find happiness; but it was actually a simple decision to take up Jesus' invitation to come with his heavy burdens of wealth and power that were we might say today “fake news” – fake good news. Francis came to Jesus with what seemed to be blessings and gave them to Jesus. He symbolically even left his clothes behind – shedding a huge weight.

✚ Now naked and free of all he owned, he took up a new garment: the yoke of Christ and began to learn the gentle and humble way of love that led him into peace and gave his soul rest: rest from worry and fear. In Christ, he found his humanity fulfilled and began to see the world around him as beautiful – every aspect of it; and he began love his neighbours with a heart unburdened by the self-loathing he had as young party boy. He saw himself as beautiful and so could see others as beautiful. In giving up his burden to Christ, he found that it is not wealth or power, but love that sets you free and that gives life meaning and purpose and joy.

✚ As we gather here today both in-person and online in a time of such great fear, divisiveness,

hatred, violence, and sickness; as we teeter on the edge of environmental disaster that begins to feel apocalyptic, and it sometimes feels like the end of the world is near: as we gather here, we gather around the gospel – the good news – not the fake news. Let us look to Francis as an example of how to get it right.

✚ We are burdened by economic and political systems that no longer serve us, by societies that systemically cause one another pain and suffering; we are burdened by an addiction to fossil fuels and to unnecessary consumer goods and it is killing us. But how do we get off the treadmill?

✚ Well, here's an idea! Listen to that invitation of Jesus and trust the good news it carries. Trust

that the burden of carrying the yoke of Christ is much lighter than that other huge load we're carrying that's breaking our backs. Is anyone here weary? I know I am – this is all too much to bear. I'm tired of it. And Jesus says: "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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.*"

✚ Einstein put it well: "*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.*" Let's try something different if we want a different future. Let's not allow the fear and hatred to dictate our path by clinging to the same old way of doing things. Instead, let's

give that huge burden away and be like Francis who found that when he trusted that deep inner voice and reached out against all of society's beliefs and rules to hug a leper that what he found was not disease, but love returned a million fold. Let us be like Christ and find power and life in friendship, in sharing a meal, in forgiving one another, in being a source of healing, and let us, like Paul: "*...never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*", which as it turns out is not a place of death, but of fulness of life. It is where our burdens are taken from us and we find rest for our souls.