

St. Francis

Jamaica Plain, October 5, 2008, Rev. Terry Burke

When I was growing up, they used to do re-runs on television of the Francis the talking mule series of movies. Francis, wise and humorous, would help his charges out of their troubles. Only as an adult did I realize that naming the mule Francis was probably a little joke, referring to St. Francis of Assisi and his love of animals. At least Francis the mule was wise, not a plaster saint like the images of St. Francis that adorn countless birdbaths.

The real Francis died almost 800 years ago, but his ideas and life are still deeply challenging. He was a radical revolutionary who confused and angered the Church because he tried to follow Jesus. He obeyed the Church, but Jesus was his example. Francis especially liked the Biblical passages we heard today from Matthew; to be a follower of Jesus was to be like a child in the kingdom of God. For Francis, to be child-like was to be loving, peaceful, intimate, caring, spontaneous, and joyful. It certainly wasn't being churchy. He also adopted Jesus' rules for his disciples on possessions when they went out preaching. He embraced poverty as a way of life. His followers begged for their food, something priests and monks were expressly forbidden to do.

Once, when Francis was invited to dine with a cardinal, he begged a few crusts of bread beforehand. When he sat down to the lavishly laden table, he added his crusts to the fare, deeply embarrassing the cardinal. In an allegorical story, Lady Poverty comes to visit Francis and his early followers. They arrive at their dwelling after dark, and Lady Poverty asks to see the buildings of their cloister. "We must eat first after our long journey," say the monks. Lady Poverty assumes a rich meal, only to be served a crust of bread. Instead of wine, she receives water from a cracked pitcher. The floor is her bed, a rock her pillow. After a good night's sleep, the monks take her to the top of a nearby hill. Looking out over the whole world, they tell her, "here is our cloister."

Francis felt called to preach God's love to the people. Priests were in church, monks in monasteries; Francis and his brothers went out to the towns and countryside where the people were and they preached. How did he preach? Francis used stories, mime, and song (he had a beautiful voice). Sometimes he preached naked to show humility (I won't try that). At the end of his life, he created a living crèche, a nativity scene with live animals and a real baby, as a visual aid for ordinary people.

The Franciscan brothers and sisters were laity, but only priests or monks were allowed to preach. Supposedly, the pope gave a verbal agreement to Francis that the Franciscans could preach. You often see paintings of Francis preaching to the birds. The birds are allegorical for his brothers, who went everywhere and took their food where they found it. You never see him preaching to the crowds of people who actually heard him; this reflects the ambiguity of his formal religious position.

Contrary to the ideas of his time, Francis thought that men and women were equal in the Gospel of Jesus. Francis had an easy intimacy and friendship with his disciple St. Clare. Writer Nikos Kazantzakis writes beautifully about this in his novel about Francis. This radical equality was far more threatening to the church than a steamy romance between the two saints. No biography of Francis was written until decades after Francis and Clare's deaths.

St. Francis preached peace by word and example. Francis traveled to Egypt to try to stop the fighting of the Fifth Crusade. Crossing the enemy lines with two brothers, he proposed a debate on theology with the Sultan's spiritual advisors. The sultan listened to Francis and sent him home with a lovely hunting horn. I saw it many years ago in Assisi. When Francis returned from the Middle East, his order had retreated from his ideals of poverty. They had become more conventionally religious, following church practices of fasts and feasts and owning property. Francis didn't believe in power over others, and tried to change the order by his own example. After Francis' death, the disagreements over his legacy would become a civil war within the Franciscans that would last for hundreds of years.

Following his death, some said Francis had stigmata, the wounds of Jesus' crucifixion. He did have bleeding ulcers, which he told his followers to ignore. These were probably the result of his decades of caring for lepers, a greater miracle to my mind than the story of an angel giving him holy wounds. After his death, Francis was soon canonized as a saint. What with his stigmata as a sign from God, surely this saint wasn't someone an ordinary person could emulate. Certainly his ideas didn't have to be taken seriously.

Francis the Green loved nature and animals, which is why we have the animal blessing today. Scholar Sir Steven Runciman writes of "the Franciscan doctrine of the souls of animals." That idea was squashed like a bug soon after Francis' death. Francis, on the other hand, spoke of "Brother Ant" praising God. While Western religious thought has seen humans as having power over nature, Francis saw a radical equality of humans and nature in Creation. As he lay dying, Francis wrote the famous canticle which we will sing today, one of the of the first poems in the Italian language. Francis praised the elements of earth, water, wind and fire as brothers and sisters. Francis especially praised the sun while he suffered in the darkness of his blindness. After finishing the words and music, he ordered his brothers to go out and sing the joyful song.

At that time, the bishop and religious leaders of Assisi were feuding and excommunicating each other. Francis brought them together and had the canticle sung to them, with an added verse about forgiveness. Another miracle, they reconciled. Close to the end, Francis added the final verse giving thanks for Sister Death. The Unitarian Universalist hymnal editors deleted that one.

Today, we need to remember Francis' teaching on living simply. He preached peace, and loving God and our brothers and sisters. He lived the example of power with, not power over others. Teaching equality with nature, he sang of communion with the created world, a communion in which animals and all nature declare the glory of God. The real Francis is truly more amazing than a talking mule.