
Saint Francis: A Real Biblical Literalist?

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Feast of St. Francis
Matthew 11:25-30
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"You have received the Gospel without payment, give it to others freely. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, no spare garment, nor sandals, nor staff." Matthew 10:8-10

These words were spoken by Jesus as he sent out his disciples as missionaries. When Francesco Bernardone heard them in church 11 centuries later they inspired him to forsake his privileged birthright. On returning home that day, he stripped off his expensive clothing, laying them at his father's feet as a sign of his renunciation of wealth. According to some accounts, Francis wandered around naked until he donned the coarse brown robe that would become the habit of the Franciscans' new clothes for a new creation.

It's a provocative act by the man known as St. Francis of Assisi; just one example from his life - a life that is characterized as a living parable. St. Francis is known as the most loved and most recognized saint in Christendom, while also being the least emulated. Francis embraces the radical call of the gospel without reservation and that makes his life both compelling and challenging.

His sole desire is to follow Jesus, intending each day to inhabit, to incarnate Jesus' example of hospitality with everyone he encountered; the rich and the poor, the powerful and the lowly, the educated and the illiterate, making no distinctions within the human family,

As the son of a rich merchant, Francis was well-educated and familiar with the ways of the world. In his early 20's, he began traveling around Italy in search of fame and fortune as a troubadour - a writer and singer of songs of courtly love - a sort of medieval contestant for "American Idol." When he found no success as a troubadour, he attempted to find wealth and glory as a soldier, but success remained elusive in that endeavor as well.

Although Francis did not find fame, his travels opened his eyes to a different world - a world where few people were prosperous, but struggled for their daily existence. His encounters with the sick and the destitute, and the masses fleeing the destruction of war pricked his heart. Often he gave away the money he was carrying to relieve the suffering of those around him. In one instance of meeting a leper, he removed his own cloak and wrapped it around the emaciated frame of this outcast of society. In each of these encounters, the Spirit was drawing Francis to his vocation one step at a time. Today's Gospel is as challenging to us as the example of St. Francis' life. The opening verses are provocative; Jesus prays thanking God for revealing the kingdom not to the wise and intelligent, but to infants - to children too young to reason, to speak or to fend for them-selves. This is hard for us to hear, particularly for a culture that places great value on education and intelligence. But God calls us to become like children, willing to learn a new way of being and acting and thinking in God's unfolding kingdom, learning to pattern our lives after the example of Jesus.

Jesus' prayer is followed by a very familiar passage: "Come to me, all who are weary, take my yoke and learn from me, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy." Our familiarity with this passage softens the radical nature of what Jesus is saying.

The idea of being yoked - being bound to anyone - challenges our modern sensibilities our strong desire to be independent and self-controlled. We understand the usefulness of yoking two animals together to make them more productive or that a young animal can be yoked to an older and well-trained one in order to teach it how to work. Two creatures are put in relationship with each other to learn and work in tandem, as a team,

Jesus invites us to take his yoke and to enter into relationship with him in order to learn from him, becoming like him and imitating his life. To be bound to him as an infant is bound to its parent.

Five years ago as part of my discernment process for priesthood, I spent three months working at the Poverty Rights Office at Emmaus House. This inner city ministry provides services for the poor and homeless giving referrals for food, housing, clothing, transportation, and night shelters. There are a number of unemployed men and women who help out at the office, working with the staff on projects, chores, or just resting from life on the street in a safe environment.

My first day at work, I met Larry. He came strutting into the office like he owned the place, speaking with a bravado I believe he used to cover up his insecurity and embarrassment of being homeless. Larry lived in an abandoned car, keeping himself clean by using the bathroom in the office, taking donated clothes from the community closet,

Larry was very tall and dark skinned, but his six-foot plus frame could not conceal the protruding belly that reminded me of pictures of starving children. His kidneys were shot and he needed to be on dialysis two - three times a week, but because he lacked transportation, he only made it to Grady periodically for treatments.

On my third day, the director asked me to give Larry a ride to Grady on my way home. While Larry had won the hearts of many of the volunteers, I was wary of him. He was too different from anyone I knew; he made me uncomfortable. I was unsure of his motives and frankly, I did not know how to deal with him. I was a little nervous as we got into my car with his belongings tied up in a garbage bag. He asked me to stop at McDonalds on the way to Grady and I did. We ate cheeseburgers and talked before going to the clinic.

This was the first of many trips Larry and I made to Grady. Over the next several months, I learned about his wife's crack habit that led to the disintegration of his family, and the loss of their home, and about his own battle with addiction. In spite of his pain and misfortune, he maintained a sense of humor, his dignity, and his desire to live and to belong. His illness was not going to get better; many of his organs were compromised. Although he eventually moved out of the abandoned car and into a rented room, his life was only marginally improved because of his poor health.

Our trips to Grady benefited me as much as they did Larry. As our relationship developed, I began to really see him; to understand him through the differences that, at first, I thought were insurmountable. Our conversations at my desk and in my car were opportunities for both of us to share our hopes and our fears. My hopes and fears about becoming a priest and his hopes and fears of making it another week.

Unlike Jesus and Francis, it took me time to discard preconceived ideas of what people ought to look, and sound, and act like. Larry was turning me around by helping me to stop focusing on the differences and to see our common life united in Christ. Larry's big brown yellow rimmed eyes, yellow from the toxins that ravaged his sick body, looked at me with acceptance. After awhile, I began to see that they were not just his eyes, but they were the eyes of Jesus looking back at me, accepting me just as I am.

As Christians, we are already double yoked. Through the waters of baptism, we are bound to God in Christ and to each other in the community of faith. Prayer and bible study, worship and participation in the sacraments strengthen our relationships and teach us about our responsibility to one another. In our relationship with Christ, we learn that the gospel is not about following rules or commandments; it is about living out our relationship with God, reacting to the good news that we are loved by sharing this love with others. In response to the love we share with Christ and each other, we learn to be yoked in a third way - yoked to a world in desperate need of being shown the love of God.

Francis yoked himself to the world by preaching the gospel and by working as a manual laborer, giving most of his earnings to the poor. Francis did not live out of fear of poverty or economic downturns, but lived out of the abundance of God's love. In an age when there was still great fear and disgust of those who suffered from leprosy, Francis chose them to be the primary recipients of his care by taking them into his own quarters, cleaning them up and nursing their wounds, risking infection himself. He lived out the gospel in both word and action, and his life inspires us to live into our baptismal promise to proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word and deed and learning to live as new creatures showing love and compassion to the least and the lost who cross our paths.

Jesus says his yoke is easy. The difficulty is our saying yes to his invitation and discerning how we will live out our yoked existence. But by being yoked with one another, our burden of proclaiming the gospel is shared; the weight is distributed and we find rest as Jesus supports us in our endeavors.

"Come to me, all who are weary, take my yoke and learn from me, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy"

Amen.

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