
How Heavy is Your Load?

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A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
Feast of St. Francis (transferred)
Matthew 11:25-30

Our celebration of the Feast of St. Francis is always one of my favorite Sundays of the year. I love to see people with their beloved animals and I am always curious to see which people belong to which pets. I like the 8:45 service with its attendant barking, a procession that has to negotiate critters in the aisles, and the most challenging sermon of the year, which thankfully I did not have to preach this year.

We have just finished our annual gathering on the Lanier house lawn where we have blessed everything from stuffed animals, to snakes, dogs, small and large, and a few largely indignant cats. We allow ourselves on this feast day to link our love of our animals to Francis' love of the creation. It is a day we often have visitors from other denominations who whisper to us their gratitude that Episcopalians do this each year.

While the pets are my favorite part of today, we need to be a bit cautious that we do not somehow equate Francis with a twelfth century Dr. Doolittle. Stories of him preaching to the birds, being accompanied by a wolf, not to mention plasticine statues of him sprinkled throughout the garden department of most major retailers can give a misleading impression of this man. He did have a love of animals and was known to have said that if a person made distinctions among God's creatures, he was likely to do the same with people. But my favorite saying of Francis' is, "Preach the gospel at all times, use words when necessary."

Francis of Assisi was born of privilege and worked in the family business until he was twenty and became a soldier. He was taken captive for a year and when he returned home, took up again the trappings of his life of wealth. A few years later, he set off for another try at soldiering and on his way had a vision to return to Assisi. When he returned something had changed, but it was not clear what. On a pilgrimage to Rome he discovered a strong affinity with the poor who were outside of St. Peter's begging. He switched clothes with one of the beggars and after a day of begging for alms himself, he was forever changed. When he returned to Assisi he left his old life completely behind, was disowned by his father after trying to give away too much of their wealth, and developed an even greater love for those on the margins.

During mass one day, he heard the words from Matthew that called the disciples to leave all they had behind. He heard this as a deeply literal and personal call. He immediately discarded his staff and shoes and embraced a life of poverty. Others, who also desired a radical response to God, started to gather around him, and when he had twelve brothers he wrote a simple rule of life for their community. Unlike cloistered monks, the Franciscans, known as the little friars, were sent out two by two to preach the gospel to any they might meet. A commitment to poverty and unwillingness to be burdened by the trappings of the world, allowed them to serve Christ in a radical way.

It is hard for us to relate to Francis. He is of a different time and frankly just radical enough to make him seem easy to dismiss, or at least caricature. I am too fond of my creature comforts to allow him to be much of a day-to-day role model, which may be why we relegate him to the bird holding statues we so often see.

But those who follow the call of Christ most radically do have something to offer us. Their ability to shed the trappings of their time and position and to affiliate themselves deeply with the cross is something we should note more closely. When we do not look carefully at their lives, we can only imagine the difficulties. The things they had to give up that we could never imagine releasing. It seems far too great a burden to take on, and so beyond our imagination that we want only to escape.

But when we look closely at those who embrace the cross, we may be surprised to discover what they really have to offer us. It is their joy. Their radical response is experienced as freedom. Francis was not regarded as a dour, impoverished soul, but is remembered for his joy. When we have seen interviews with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, it is her smile that we remember. When Paul writes of a "new creation," in the letter to the Galatians, it is with the relief of that which has been let go. These witnesses are not radically burdened, but radically free to love.

The gospel passage today reminds us to realize our burdens are not ours to be carried alone. That if we allow ourselves to be deeply linked with Christ, we will find the rest our soul craves and needs. The reminder is not their by accident. It is something we easily forget as we take on far more burdens than we can possibly carry alone.

There is a wonderful fable of a man who has been told that to gain wisdom he must find the largest boulder he can carry without assistance. He is to place the boulder in a wagon and pull it to the top of a steep mountain. So the man looks around and after he finds the boulder places it in the wagon and begins the journey upward. It is a heavy load, but manageable. As he continues upward though, he keeps noticing other large rocks. If one boulder can give him wisdom, wouldn't it be better to carry even more? So, each time he sees one, he places that one in with the others. The load becomes almost unbearable, but somehow he manages to get to the top of the mountain. He is exhausted and resentful. He cannot imagine how hauling that heavy of a load could possibly have made him wiser. So, he shouts at God. "Why have you burdened me with so many rocks? This load is too heavy!" God responds, "Why did you pick up all those extra rocks, when I had just given you one to carry?"

We all carry a lot of boulders around. We carry the burdens of those we love and care for and may find ourselves straining under the weight. We carry the burden of maintaining our frenetic lifestyles and may exhaust ourselves to the point of no longer viewing our life as a gift. If we have loaded our wagons to the breaking point, we may even hear the call of the gospel as just one more rock that is too heavy for us to manage. We resent the idea that God might be asking even more of us.

But when we find ourselves this overwhelmed, it is usually a good time to step back and do some boulder sorting.

Jesus calls us to remember that we are not meant to carry the load alone. Jesus reminds us that we are yoked with him. If we think we are hauling up the mountain by ourselves, even if we do not pick up any extra rocks, we have just transformed our own boulder into a giant idol, worthy of the golden calf. The weight we experience is rarely related to the size or number, but who we think is carrying it.

The Jesuits have a wonderful prayer exercise to assist with this. If you have a concern that you need to relinquish they invite you to carry that intercession first to Blessed Mary. After you have spent enough time with her, she invites you to both go to Jesus with your petition. Then after that time seems complete, the three of you go forward to God the Father. There is something about adding people to go with you towards God that is very powerful. It is a visual reminder that we are not meant to save ourselves, but open ourselves more deeply to salvation. Our lives are meant to be lived in community and inspire others through our love and joy.

This is I think what Francis is talking about when he said, "Preach the gospel at all times, use words when necessary." He is inviting us to lives that radiate good news, not weary hearts. If you find yourself tired and needing rest, Jesus wants you to come and experience the peace and rest of God. Isn't that worth letting go of a few boulders for?

Amen

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