

Sermon Notes for the Saint Francis Celebration

Holy Women, Holy Men Lections for Saint Francis' Feast Day

[Jeremiah 22:13-16](#) / [Psalm 148:7-14](#) / [Galatians 6:14-18](#) / [Matthew 11:25-30](#)

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Generosity, Power, and Poverty

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

One early story of Francis, long before he openly renounced all worldly possessions and founded the Friars Minor in the early thirteenth century, is that he was approached by a beggar while selling cloth in the Assisi marketplace. The son of a wealthy cloth merchant, Francis would have recognized the affluence of our context. Growing up, he had every imaginable worldly comfort – and that most enticing and precious of all commodities of affluence: *choice*. He tried his hand as a businessman, as a soldier, as a man of decadent leisure. But here, with a beggar asking for a mere few coins, Francis was confronted with the greatest choice of all: how to best help the lost and forgotten among us.

One of the latest debates in Mill Valley is whether or not panhandlers should be permitted to beg at the intersection of East Blithedale and Camino Alto. It made the front page of the *Independent Journal* the other day, with a respectable citizen, born into a respectable family in town, asserting concerns for traffic safety over and against the need for a bit of money to buy food or water for those passing from one shelter to the next. It's a smaller version of the perennial debate in San Francisco (ironically named after the saint we recognize this day) over what to do about panhandling. The real issue, it seems to me, is not traffic or public safety as much as the unsettling reminder the begging poor bring to the midst of our affluence – a reminder of the injustices of our economy, and more profoundly a reflection of our own vulnerability that we can often deny with our material wealth.

It was Francis who re-discovered, in a radical move that echoes Jesus' teachings in the Gospel, how to undermine the whole argument. He ran after the beggar in the marketplace in Assisi, and when he caught up with him, he emptied the entire contents of his pockets into the beggar's hands. It would be like handing a panhandler your entire wallet or purse – an invitation to a complete stranger to run through your whole credit line, empty your bank account of cash, or give away the power of your identity. Francis was scorned by his friends for such an act of radical generosity. Anyone who did that on East Blithedale at Camino Alto would probably be laughed all the way to the 101 interchange and make the front page of the *IJ*. But how a move like that would radically change the climate of the debate over whether or not the indigent poor can stand there begging for a few quarters, a bottle of water, or a snack from a passing car!

Francis, when he at last embraced abject poverty as not just a way of life, but the Way he would follow after Christ, found himself re-anchored in the earth. Taking Jesus' instructions literally, he walked unshod and barely clothed, begging his way for food and carrying not even a bag or a walking stick with him. He touches us in our context as perhaps the first Christian hippie, the first Christian environmentalist. He probably smelled. Rumor has it he even talked of befriending the lice on his scalp – enough to give our contemporary school officials fits of apoplexy! He called the scorching sun his brother and the cold moon of chilly nights his sister. From helping lepers to the legend of his making peace with a ravenous wolf, Francis became intimate with the very things from which our worldly affluence and comforts were meant to protect us: with cold and hunger, death and disease, danger and vulnerability. In this way, Francis embraced the Christian humility of accepting our true reality. And it is no small irony that Franciscans remain one of the largest religious orders in Christianity, and the largest in The Episcopal Church and wider Anglicanism, now eight centuries later. They offer an alternative to the narrow and often stifling confines of our socio-economic climbing and covetousness.

Would Francis recognize a world of highways, cars, airplanes, and the complexities of Western free market capitalism? Would he understand the power-brokering of our politicians and the tug-of-war between wealthy corporations? I would venture to

guess he would see at work in our lives the very same dynamics he decided to set aside in the thirteenth century. Would he understand our desire to have our pets blessed this morning, of our friendships with the creatures and the hummingbirds and wild creatures of Marin, whether they swim, walk, slink, or fly? I'm sure he would, though he might point out as a dog trainer I know muses, that it is not so much our pets as we ourselves who require deep training in the realities of these relationships!

When I recently attended the life profession of a Franciscan brother in San Francisco, the preacher at the service made note of a critical aspect of Franciscan spirituality, rooted as it is so deeply in the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "Poverty," he said, "is not the absence of riches." For Francis discovered a different kind of riches when he set aside the affluent lifestyle of his family and renounced his material inheritance. He discovered a charisma that built a movement capturing the attention of popes and prelates, politicians and peoples, and the imagination of a Christianity yearning to free itself of corruption. He discovered a wealth of inspiration that brought about the rebuilding of churches throughout Assisi and beyond, and radically challenged the indolence of overly wealthy Benedictine communities and the machinations of ecclesiastical officials.

"Poverty is not the absence of riches, but the absence of *power*."

Francis gave up control over his own destiny, and made no pretense to take the helm of the movement his witness unleashed. While he was called upon to engage in high-level conversations with the rich and the powerful, he eschewed authority for simplicity and lived quietly and generously in a society of friars and sisters for many years. It was entirely the work of the Spirit moving among the people that re-formed Western Christianity subversively and *from within* at the height of the Middle Ages. When Francis embraced poverty, he gave up his power to control what God was doing in his midst and through him. And in an irony worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Francis became more powerful than he could have imagined, perhaps in the way our prayers in the Daily Office offer as a closing benediction: "Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."

Poverty in the fullest sense of the Franciscan vow and the witness of Christ and his first followers is about setting aside the personal power, the panoply of choices we all covet, the craven grasping to control our own destiny – so that God's power, the unleashed an unpredictable wind of the Spirit, the insatiable life of the Divine, may go to work in and through our lives. It is an irony worthy of the Gospel that our worldly understanding of power and control diminishes us to the point of utter deprivation: of soul, of spirit, of community. Our material goods serve too often to more isolate us than comfort us, to dominate us with anxiety rather than to serve us with peace. Our pursuit of wealth as our culture can poison us into a false sense of security and control, when Francis' way of radical renunciation of material goods and choice actually unleashed more influence and power flowing from the Spirit of God than a hundred popes, corporate moguls, or presidents could muster – with all of their economic, political, and military might – for the Ages.

I invite you to take away that lesson of Francis this day as we have our friends blessed in God's House, and as we talk openly for the first time this season about what it means to give out of our gratitude. Think of your giving, both to this community, and in the wider world to the least among us – even to the creatures of the earth – as a giving away of *power*, as a way of embracing poverty and its true riches of simplicity and divine grace. Francis discovered this in the marketplace as a youth when he emptied his pockets for a beggar. He was a laughingstock, yes, but isn't it an interesting thing that we remember Francis' generosity today, eight hundred years later as saintliness, his generosity as a reflection of God's grace – and we cannot name even one of his friends who derided him as they clung so easily to their personal power and prestige!

To live into one of the greatest of all spiritual lessons, to give away power, to embrace poverty – it all begins with generosity: a generosity that Francis knew flows directly from the heart of our most generous God. . . from our God in Christ who embraces not just the beggar and the forgotten, but every leaf, every slinking creature, every speck of the Cosmos, every one of us. . . who gives away divine life even on the cross for us. . .and as Francis reminds us, wraps us up all together in a love of infinite abundance that transcends even death itself.