

Sermon for Feast of St. Francis  
All Saints Episcopal Church  
San Leandro CA

Jeremiah 22: 13-16  
Galatians 6:14-18  
Matthew 11:25-30

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Good Morning. My name is Clark Berge. I am a member of the Society of St. Francis, an Episcopal religious order of Franciscans. It is a great pleasure to be here with you this morning, to celebrate the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. There is much that is important about St. Francis that still speaks prophetically to society and can radicalize our imaginations, even with practically 800 years between his times and ours. I'll try not to swamp you with details! I will just briefly talk about those qualities of St. Francis hinted at in the Scriptures for today, as some reasons for our celebration of this remarkable saint. Jeremiah is talking about justice as the basis for living in the right way with God and society; St. Paul calls the Galatians and all of us to be transformed after the example of Christ crucified; Jesus frames discipleship as essentially not complicated, not burdensome, though he never minces words about the potential cost involved. So Francis: aflame with love that inspires justice; in love with the Savior so much that his body manifests the very wounds of Jesus; loving God and the world so much that everything he sees, everyone he meets reveals the love of God and thus becomes a source of delight.

Ideas can liberate. Liberation of our imaginations leads to lives renewed and refreshed and gives us a path to follow. This inspiration and renewal is why we take time to celebrate the lives of certain saints. Certainly since the beginning of civilization, one

of the major preoccupations has been how to live together fairly and honestly: people are always concerned about issues of justice. Before we can make just laws we need to have transformed consciousness and hearts imbued with compassion. Francis walked into many situations that have a modern flavor though the stories seem charmingly quaint. Don't be fooled by quaintness. When he traveled to the town of Gubbio he found the people there in an uproar, engorged with blood lust to kill a wolf that they felt was threatening them—their livelihoods as shepherds and the safety of their families. We know something about mobs, people wanting to scapegoat something or someone. We know about killing as an answer to danger and real or imagined threats. Francis interrupts this mob response and with only one companion he goes unarmed into the forest to meet the wolf. The first thing he does is claim kinship: "Peace, Brother Wolf" he is reported to have said. He brokers a deal (How? I don't know, he was a saint!). Recognizing the wolf's hunger, he negotiates food for protection. If the people feed him the wolf will be their friend. And that is what he does. Calling the people of the town to meet the wolf; they all agree to feed the wolf, and the wolf lives among them a vivid reminder of Francis and his extraordinary insight into love and compassion that makes for true justice.

It would be easy to conclude that a man who could charm wolves, and in other episodes make friends with a mortal enemy like the Muslim leader of his day (when the Crusades were hugely popular), that he had an easy life, won every debate. Nothing could be further from the truth. From the beginning of his ministry after his conversion people laughed at him, mocked him, some threw stones at him. As his ministry progressed and the brotherhood became hugely influential and thousands of young men joined, there was tremendous pressure on Francis to adopt the customs of the day, to

fashion rules for the brothers, to parse out what they had to do so they could be directed and if necessary punished for their failures. Francis was repulsed by this small vision of rules. “We have the Gospels!” He said. “What more do we need? Live the way Jesus taught!” His brothers replied that this was way too hard. They wanted a Rule, they wanted fine, strong buildings to live in. No more of this sleeping in hedgerows singing and begging for food. Finally after the Pope intervened Francis complied with a Rule and allowed modifications to their life. But he resigned as leader of the Order. He felt he’d failed. If only he could have said or done or showed them in just the right way then his brothers would not be abandoning his vision. Heartsick, perhaps verging on despair, he went to the top of Mount La Verna to pray for some sign of God’s blessing or favor. God heard his prayer and seared his flesh with the marks of Jesus’ crucifixion. This is what it is to know God’s love, to show love in the world: a fitting reminder that our salvation came not through prevailing over people and institutions but through death and resurrection. A reminder that God uses fractious human beings to accomplish divine purposes, loves us in all our frailty.

Francis’ strength and insight came from his prayer. He spent many hours in prayer in all kinds of places—cold and remote in most cases. But we would miss the point entirely if we latched onto the idea that Francis’ life was grim, as unappealing and difficult as the stories we have tell us of his long fasts, the poor shelter, and the sheer strenuousness of it all. No, for him the yoke was easy, the burden light because everything he did brought him closer to his Beloved. I once asked my mother if she thought her life had been hard—raising four children, financial struggles, and the usual sorts of challenges. She said quite fiercely: “No!” Because she did it for love. Love leavens the lump of life’s givens and burdens. Love can make a potential misery into a something different. Experience of

God's love helped Francis overcome his disgust at lepers; encountering one after a lifetime of avoiding them, Francis was suddenly seized by the desire to embrace him. He did and discovered Christ. The thing we fear the most can be the gate for grace in our lives. This alchemy of love that changes us, can change the world through our prayer, is for me the most compelling reason to celebrate Francis.

Francis is standing at the crossroads between us ordinary people and Jesus. He started out not so different from any of us. The Holy Spirit gripped this young man and as his life unfolded led him deeper and deeper into a life of working for justice, personal spiritual transformation and extraordinary service in the name of love. Each and every one of us has the opportunity to walk that way with him. You don't have to join an order, you don't have to make friends with wolves. All any of us is asked to do is to love: love God, our neighbors and ourselves. Offer this and God can work miracles.

Let us pray with St. Francis, his prayer called the *Absorbeat*: May the power of your love, O Lord, fiery and sweet as honey, so fill my heart as to with draw it from all that is under heaven. And grant that I may be willing to die for love of your love as you died for love of mine. Amen.

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