

St. Francis – The Rev. Rick Bellows

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One way to understand St. Francis is to look at his place in history, and to think about his growth over time. Last night we marked the 800th anniversary of his death in 1226. He was born in 1181. He was named Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardon but was called Francesco, Frenchy, after his French mother. He grew up as one of the wild boys in town, a natural leader by the time they were teenagers. Francis often would lead them in their drunken revelries in town.

Francis's father was quite rich and well established as a silk and cloth merchant. There was a clash between the merchants and the noble people of Assisi; The clash grew into a prolonged civil war. The noble families left for Perugia and the two cities were at war. In 1202 Francis, then 19, marched off to war as a soldier of Assisi. Almost immediately he was captured, thrown into prison, and held for ransom, but his father wouldn't pay. Francis's was in prison a year giving him plenty of time to assess his life and consider his future. Finally he was sent home, too sick to continue to imprison without risking he would die and become an excuse for more fighting. Not only was he worthless as a soldier, he was worthless as a prisoner.

Francis took about a year to recover. He spent a lot of time alone with wild animals as his dearest companions. At the end of his convalescence he rode out as a soldier again, this time as a crusader. Though it may have looked like a joke, he was sincere, until very early on in the journey, Francis received a vision telling him to return home and wait to hear God's will.

Francis became a penitent, a semi religious person who was sorry for his sins. He started hanging out amongst the ruins of an old church next to a remote corner of property his father owned. One day he was enjoying his solitude when from the altar cross in this ruined church, Christ Jesus spoke to him, "Go repair my church, which as you see is falling into ruins." He at first took it literally and started rebuilding the ruined church of San Damiano, and then a couple of others. He would beg for stones, or sell some of his father's cloth to buy bricks. His old friends mostly saw him as weird, but at least one, Bernardo, was curious and would sometimes help Francis.

Francis's father grew tired of funding his son's religious exploits building churches and feeding the poor, He dragged Francis before the bishop of Assisi to see if he could talk sense into his son. Francis stripped off all his clothes, handed them to his father, and standing there naked broke all ties to his father, appealing to God and throwing himself under the protection of the church. He quickly was covered by the bishop's cope, a symbolic covering of protection.

Soon thereafter, Francis was walking along a path and there was a leper ahead. Lepers were to move off the path for nonlepers. The leper started to yield. Francis halted him, went up to him, and embraced him with a kiss. He did this because he knew his revulsion produced a false separation between them. For the first time he saw the leper eye to eye, not someone to be pitied, but as a person to be loved.

By this time, Bernardo joined Francis, then another reveler, Sylvester, the merchant who sold Francis bricks, joined the group. Looking for direction they went to mass, and heard the Gospel reading from Matthew 10. In this way God called them to poverty and to preach.

They put together a simple rule and went to the pope to have it accepted. There were others before Francis who called for poverty and preaching, but they reviled and condemned the church and so

they were excommunicated or even executed. I think Francis naturally knew it was important to navigate the politics. His rule was accepted because it wasn't judgmental.

There are many other great stories of Francis, but for now I'll jump to shortly before his death. He summed it up saying, "I did what God gave me to do, You do what God gives you to do." I see in these words a call to be serious about what God gives you to do, but also a lack of competition or a lack of condemnation.

A way to see if someone made a difference is to find consistent qualities that endured in followers. For example, Franciscans don't compete to be holier than others. They do what God gives them to do. Humility is the key. A Franciscan is who they are before God and nothing more, nor nothing less.

Let's look at some followers of Francis from different periods in history to find some consistent qualities.

Consider Bonaventure, born 5 years before Francis died. He was one of the greatest theologians of his time, but he would always emphasize that a fool's love and knowledge of God may be greater than that of a wise person. There is an understanding of scholarship that continued from Francis's day that God may be more accessible to a fool than an educated scholar.

Consider William of Ockham, a great philosopher 75 years after Bonaventure, he is known for what would later be called Ockham's Razor, a principle that is paraphrased, "Between two competing theories the simplest is preferred." There is the Franciscan approach that keeps us from overcomplicating things. Keep it simple.

Now let's consider a friend of mine, a contemporary black woman saddened by how few black people join the Order (and let's face it, many churches like this one). The Order has Latinos in Hispanic countries, but not many in the US or Canada. Franciscans notice who is missing—who is not here, who is excluded, and we look for solutions. Could what attracted my friend to the order in the 1980s attract more people of color today?

She became a Franciscan because there is a rich tradition and expectation that any of us can experience God. Since Francis's day, Franciscans have been mystics, but in our mysticism we don't experience God by transcending reality. We experience God incarnate in reality as we love, care for, and enjoy creation.

Every time I find followers of Francis revealing things rooted in the life of Francis, I also find things that reach through time to touch our lives. These are qualities that continue throughout the 800 years that separate us from those earliest Franciscans to today. We are the enduring legacy of those first Franciscan saints.

Let us pray, Most high and glorious God
Enlighten the darkness of our hearts
Give us true faith, certain hope,
and perfect charity,
sense and knowledge, Lord,
that we may carry out
Your holy and true command.