

Francis – A Saint for Our Times

**Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 148:7-14;
Galatians 6:14-16; Matthew 11:25-30**
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St. Francis Episcopal Mission, San Bernardino

The Rev. John C. Forney

Today we celebrate the feast day of our parish, St. Francis Day. St. Francis is surely a saint for our times. St. Francis came into a dog-eat-dog world where the one percent had gobbled up all the goodies and the devil take the hindmost. His world was not unlike our own.

The book of Job is an ancient attempt to understand the evil that would negate all the good of creation. In the telling of this ancient folk tale, God allows Satan to put a righteous man to the test to refute Satan's boast that, given enough misery, Job will curse God to God's face.

While few Episcopalians would have such an understanding of the nature of evil, we do not discount the central premise as given voice in Job 5, "Man is born for trouble as the sparks fly upward" -- another way of saying that sometimes "stuff" happens. Evil lurks in the hearts of men and women. The Shadow knows its depths and dimensions.

We saw raw evil on full display this past week in the way a victim of sexual assault was mocked and laughed at by our president and an entire audience attending his political rally in Mississippi. We saw how Dr. Christine Ford's anguish was cavalierly dismissed by an entire half of the Senate Judiciary Committee after her heart-wrenching testimony concerning a sexual assault. Such callous disregard for another's pain is surely evil of the worst sort.

Some of us were sharing our horrified reactions to this treatment of women by the insensitive leadership of our government when one woman dared to be vulnerable and share her experience. "I know how she (Dr. Ford) felt. I thought he was going to kill me. I thought I was going to die." It was a holy moment. How could even the most thoughtless man make light of such a revelation? The three of us men sat in stunned silence, shamed by the enormity of such evil. The tenderness of the moment did not escape us.

Our church in Pasadena, All Saints, last week held a rally for men. It was a solemn occasion for us guys to renounce a history of patriarchy that has given rise to a culture of impunity, where men feel entitled to grab women by wherever. It was a time for self-reflection and to make amends. Yes, there is much to confess. But it goes beyond feeling sorry or embarrassed. It goes to putting on Christ and the whole armor of the Gospel. It's about leaving old shibboleths behind. It goes to standing besides the women we care for and affirming their full personhood. It goes to accepting our soft side as men and affirming its power. It goes to denouncing crass sexist jokes and "locker room" talk. It goes to acknowledging the power and gifts of women. It goes to the realization that dealing with the present evil of this day will require all of us, women and men of stout hearts. It will demand a willingness to persist. That is why Elizabeth Warren is one of my favorites. In the face of chauvinism and Wall Street corruption, she persisted. And so has Dr. Christine Blasey Ford. She has persisted in claiming her truth, and our democracy is far the better for it. She will be remembered in the same breath as Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Anita Hill.

Francis, though he grew up in splendor, discovered his humanity among the poor, among those beset upon by the entitled wealthy. Francis affirmed the indispensable contribution women had to offer through his lifelong companionship with his guide and coworker, Clare. Together, they turned the Church upside down. In an evil age, the two of them healed their world through their simple outreach to the weak and vulnerable. Francis knew the interconnection of all living things.

And that is why Francis is one of my beloved saints. He could delight in creation and all its critters. In Francis there is no "blaming the victim." Francis was the incarnation of empathy. Franciscan spirituality gives guidance to those who would enter such wounds of the marginalized, to those who would lay themselves vulnerable to their pain. It is a spirituality of strength for healing and enables us to become in our own right wounded healers. Let us see in the days to come if the depth of Francis' spirituality has touched any of our political class. And who.

Native spirituality is suffused with this same understanding. Robert Kennedy in his speech to the National Congress of American Indians in 1963 quoted Chief Joseph of the Nez Pierce when he surrendered to U.S. troops in 1877. This is what he said:

"We shall all be alike -- brothers of one father and one mother, with one sky above us, and one country around us, and one

government for all. For this day the Indian race is waiting and praying.”¹

This is the healing we now so desperately seek to overcome the destructive tribalism that is tearing our nation apart. Francis would get this.

Yes, bad stuff happens. Most of the wounds are self-inflicted. But in the valley of despair there is another voice: that of Francis and his companions. But we need to get beyond what Richard Rohr facetiously referred to as “bird bath Franciscanism.”

Francis and his companion Clare in a dissolute age not unlike our own forged another path. Their path was grounded in astonishment and simplicity. It was grounded in community and vision. It was without pretension. Francis proclaims his vision:

My brothers, my brothers, God has called me to walk in the way of humility, and showed me the way of simplicity...The Lord has shown me that he wants me to be a new kind of fool in the world, the God does not want to lead us by any other knowledge than that.²

Francis and Clare did not renounce the church and world but lived on the edges. Their vision of justice was a lifestyle beyond consumption and privilege. Francis and Clare were two dropouts who spurned society’s goodies and rewards.

Their way was the way of solidarity. Yes, they would have stood with Dr. Ford and all women victims of assault, as surely as they stood with the lepers and other outcasts. Just as sure as Francis stood with all nature. Francis understood the 148th Psalm and rejoiced in its vision:

Praise the Lord from the earth,
You great sea creatures and all the depths;
Fire and hail, snow and clouds;
Stormy wind, fulfilling His word;
Mountains and all hills;

¹ Robert Kennedy, “Remarks before the National Congress of American Indians, 1963, at the Grand Pacific Hotel, Bismarck, North Dakota. Department of Justice Library.

² Richard Rohr. *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Franciscan Media, 2016.

Fruitful trees and all cedars;
 Beasts and all cattle;
 Creeping things and flying fowl;

We, likewise, are called to stand with those here in San Bernardino who live paycheck to paycheck, or Social Security check to Social Security check. We are called to be at with one with those who each month have to make that wrenching choice between paying the rent, or filling a prescription.

On the cover of *Time* magazine, Hope Brown of Versailles, Kentucky, shares her story of economic distress, the story of any of a thousand classroom teachers across the heartland of America. “I have a master’s degree, sixteen years of experience, work two extra jobs and donate blood plasma to pay the bills. I’m a teacher in America...”³

And how do we be in solidarity with those who make up the vast majority of our nation? It begins in prayer – no, not our usual “laundry list” prayer. I mean deep down listening prayer. Prayer that lets in the heartbreak and desperate hope for something better. Prayer that admits the dark clouds of depression and hopelessness. Pain that admits tragedy and pain. I’m talking of the sort of prayer few senators seemed to have taken time for as Dr. Christine and the other women told their stories. Prayer poured forth from conscientious teachers attempting to do an impossible job with little support. That’s where solidarity begins.

Solidarity is grounded in community. Who can stop global warming themselves? The action needed cannot be accomplished by one person alone. It will beat you down. You will become a burnout statistic. That is why Francis and Clare never gave up on the Church. They perceived within it the kernel of faith and wisdom preserved over the ages, often in spite of the church itself. That kernel was Jesus Christ and the prophets. That kernel was the core of the faithful who clung to the sick and dying, even to the risk of their own contagion, sickness and death. Solidarity means supporting unions. It means caring for the elderly and ensuring that they are part of the family.

Nikos Kazantzakis in his novel, *St. Francis*, describes the beginnings of Francis’ and Clare’s community at an evening meal. Huddled together in the ruins of an ancient cathedral, they await dinner as Francis prepares a scrumptious soup for his followers. Before they have a chance to gather to be served, Francis grabs up a handful of ashes and throws it in the soup. He does this to ween his followers

³ Katie Reilly. “The Life of the American Teacher.” *Time Magazine*, September 24, 2018, 27-33.

from being addicted to the rich tastes of the world. At that point in the story, my wife decided that she didn't want to become a saint. The joke in our family has been ever since we read the book together, whenever the food tastes too good, should one of us rush out to the barbecue and grab up some ashes?⁴

I think that solidarity need not be quite that stringent. But it will surely take one outside of his or her comfort zone. It might involve the extra effort of finding a candidate who supports the full inclusion of women and minorities in our common life at all levels. It might involve getting in a car and working for that person in Arizona or in San Diego, California. It might involve sending some money. Remember, that huge numbers of small gifts can often make a big difference. It might even involve YOU running for office.

There are voices of consolation, voices of solidarity, voices of hope. One doesn't have to search for them. They are all around us. It all depends what we are looking for. If we expect only to find despair and dreariness, we'll surely find it. If we come open to hope and replenishment, it's there to be found. Dan Rather is one of my solid guides. He brings the perspective of years and has not been ground down.

Dan Rather, concludes his weekly post on "Reader Supported News" with these words of resolve:

But I will not stand by and let the forces of small mindedness, prejudice, or sanctimony tell me or, more importantly, those who have stood up with far greater courage, that our voices don't matter. I will not allow truth to be obscured, gaslit, or mocked. This is not about politics... or policy... It's about decency and the common bonds of humanity. And in the end, I believe that justice will prevail once more and trample out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.⁵

One of my favorite politicians, cut out of the same cloth as St. Francis, John Lewis says this about confronting the powers and principalities...urges us on for organizing some righteous trouble:

⁴ Nikos Kazantzakis, *St. Francis*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1962.

⁵ Dan Rather. RSN column, 10-6-2018

“This is the way another generation did it, and you too can follow that path, studying the way of peace, love and nonviolence and finding a way to get in the way. Finding a way to get in trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble.”⁶

In the days to come, find a way to get in the way, find a way to get in some righteous, godly, necessary trouble. It would do your soul good, and put a smile on St. Francis’ face.

Amen.

⁶ Sarah Jaffe. *Necessary Trouble*. New York, NY: Nation Books, 2016. p x.