

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi
October 4, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 22:13-16
Psalm 148:7-14
Galatians 6:14-18
Matthew 6:25-34

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

I'm cheating today. When a lesser feast day – and the Feast of Saint Francis is technically a *lesser* feast day – we're supposed to skip it; Sundays always take precedence.

But not this time. I didn't want to pass over this saint day this year. We've lost enough already.

We may not be able to gather here today with our pets, but we can at least recall the times when we did – tenaciously holding on to the hope that we'll be able to gather here with our pets next year.

And I think we need the other reminders of the day – and of the saint – as well.

So let me start with this morning's gospel, chosen for this occasion. It's not what we would normally hear here on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, but these words do fit a celebration of St. Francis, the patron saint of creation. What's more, these are words we need to hear.

Jesus says, "Do not worry ..." Not just once there at the start, but twice more near the end.

It's pretty good advice.

I think we need that reminder, this year maybe more than ever. Life always gives us a worry list: work, health, family, deadlines. And these days, we could add to the list: a pandemic; an economy in tatters; forests and communities devastated by wildfires; and, of course, a divided political system at a time when we need something functional. (And now the President of the United States has become infected with a potentially life-threatening illness.)

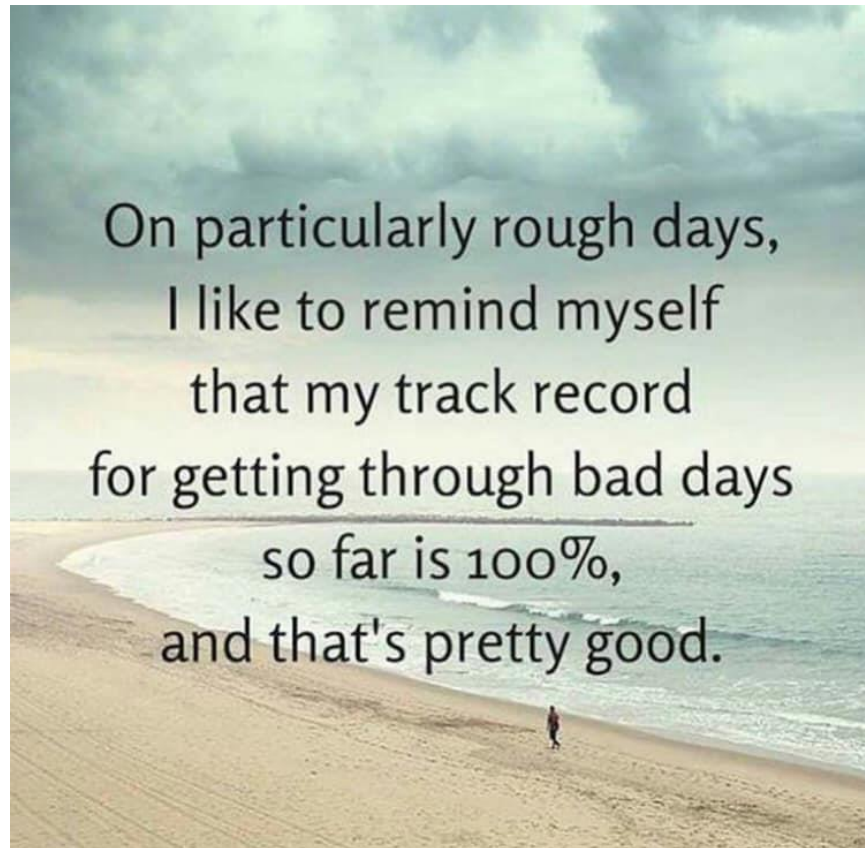
We have a lot to worry about.

The thing is, worrying hardly ever does any good. Several years ago, I came across some statistics about the uselessness of our worry:

- 40% of what we worry about never happens;
- 35% of what we worry about we cannot change;
- 15% of what we worry about turns out BETTER than we expected; and
- 8% of what we worry about is just petty, useless stuff.

What that means – in case you weren't doing the math in your head – is that only 2% of what we worry about matters; 98% of the time our worrying doesn't accomplish anything. (Truthfully, I don't know where the statistics came from – or how anyone could really “slap metrics” on our worry. But these numbers make the point Jesus made: “Do not worry.”)

Perhaps you've seen the reminder that goes around on social media from time to time.



“I tell you,” Jesus says, “do not worry ...”

Maybe that's helpful. Or maybe – Jesus' admonition and the social media reminder notwithstanding – we worry still. (And maybe we worry that we worry too much.)

Fortunately, Jesus doesn't merely tells us what **not** to do. He goes on to tell us what we should do instead:

Look at the birds of the air ...

Consider the lilies of the field ...

Saint Francis got that message. He traded in a life of wealth and privilege for a life of simplicity and poverty. He literally stripped off the fine clothing (of which he was once so vainly proud) and put on whatever clothing poor peasants could share with him.

And looking at the birds is what precipitated the first blessing of animals 800 years ago.

One telling of the story says that it happened on a warm autumn day early on in his ministry. Francis wandered outside, full of self-doubt, wondering if should have settled down and gotten married (as his family had wanted him to do). And as he was pondering all this, he looked up and saw a great number of birds – doves, crows, and all sorts of birds gathered together. He must have thought they were a congregation, for he preached to them right then and there:

“My brother and sister birds, you should praise ... and always love [your Creator, who] gave you feathers for clothes, wings to fly and all other things that you need. It is God who made you noble among all creatures, making your home in thin, pure air. Without sowing or reaping, you receive God’s guidance and protection.”

At this, the birds began to spread their wings, stretch their necks and gaze at Francis, rejoicing and praising God in a wonderful way according to their nature. And then he gave them his blessing, making the sign of the cross over them. That was the first blessing of the animals.

Francis later wondered aloud to his fellow companions why he had never preached to birds before. And from then on, he called on all animals and reptiles to praise their Creator – to give thanks for making them as they were.

So the story goes.

Whether that’s how it all started for him or not, there are countless stories told about his profound sense of kinship with creation. He released “Brother Rabbit” from a trap. He let “Sister Raven” serve as his alarm clock. He put honey out for the bees in winter. (I recorded my re-telling of “Saint Francis and the Wolf” the other day for our children.¹)

In his most famous song, Francis invites all his brother and sister creatures – whether minerals, plants or animals – to praise their Creator. These creatures include ‘Brother Sun’ and ‘Sister Moon,’ ‘Brother Fire’ and ‘Sister Water,’ as well as ‘Sister Earth our Mother,’ with all her various fruits and colored flowers.

Francis, you see, understood that it’s worth our while, our time, our reverence to “look at the birds of the air,” to “consider the lilies of the field.” It does our souls good; it makes us whole. That’s part of the legacy he’s left us.

He’s left us other traditions, as well. Yes, there’s the blessing of animals. And also the Christmas Eve nativity. He wanted to depict the birth of Jesus, showing the full poverty, humility, and simplicity of that birth. So he arranged for mass to be said on Christmas Eve in a cave, with real animals – an ox and a donkey – attending. He invited townsfolk to take part. It was a deliberate counterpoint to the greed and materialism of his day.

And Francis showed us how to live in love for one another. There was that time he encountered a leper on the road. Francis had grown up vain and secure and proud. And he – like all his contemporaries – had a fear and revulsion and loathing of lepers. One day, however, he met a man afflicted with leprosy while he was riding his horse. Though the sight of the leper filled him with horror and disgust, Francis got down off his high horse and embraced him. But when Francis mounted his horse again and looked around, he could not see the leper anywhere. And it dawned on him that it was Jesus whom he had kissed!

Thereafter, Franciscans ministered to lepers – feeding them and caring for their wounds. And leaving us the example of looking for ways to minister to those the wider society rejects.

By this point in his life, Francis' world had been so turned upside down from that he said, "If you want to see the Kingdom of God, you have to stand on your head!"ⁱⁱ

Francis left us all this. And more.

There's the prayer Francis left us, as well; it seems so very timely these days.

Brother Curtis Almquist, an Episcopal monk, says that "the church hierarchy was double-minded about Francis ... as smitten as it was suspicious." And Francis faced criticism even within his own community. That's the backstory to the prayer he gave us.

We want to remember the Francis who showed such love and joy toward sea and sky, fish and fowl, young and old, the well and wounded alike. All that is true.

However in his own lifetime Francis also faced enormous conflict and dissension, both within his own community of friars and within the Church at large.

The prayer attributed to Saint Francis that begins with, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace" was very autobiographical for Francis.

The prayer, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace" came from a context where there was no peace.

When Francis prays, "Where there is hatred" (because there was hatred among his own ranks) he prays, "let us sow love."

When he prays, "Where there is discord (because there was strident discord among those closest to him), let there be union."

When he prays, "Where there is doubt (because there was doubt), let there be faith."

When he prays, "where there is despair (because there was deep disillusionment), let there be hope."

"Where there is darkness (because there was absolute gloom), let there be light.

“Where there is sadness (because there was such grief), let there be joy.”

And the phrase which I find most revealing and most meaningful: “Where there is injury, pardon,” because there was so much injury happening among his own friars, various factions convinced only they had it right.

Francis of Assisi is a saint for today. He gave such a poignant example to how connected we all are to one another – with all our differences in culture, language, race, gender, sexual orientation, education, vocation, age, privilege, health – we are so much the same, we belong to one another, and we need one another.

Francis also gave us such a poignant example of our being stewards of creation, to the life that surrounds us on earth and sky and sea, in birds and animals, flowers and trees. All living creatures, not just humans, have a claim on life. We belong to one another; we need one another. Saint Francis really shows us the way for today.

In my newsletter article this month, I shared an exercise of the imagination suggested to us by our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. What if, he wonders, there were not churches and religious folk? Imagine the soup kitchens that wouldn't be there. Imagine the work of advocacy that wouldn't be happening. Imagine the acts of kindness that wouldn't be shown.

And he goes on ask us to imagine a world without hospitals named for St. Francis (and other religious folk down through the centuries) who care for the sick in the name of Christ.

Imagine the world without Francis: without the stories told about him; without the traditions he left us; without the example of a holy life lived so very well; without the prayer he gave to us. This world would be a bleaker place without Francis.

And this – all this! – is why I'm cheating today. By rights, today should be a normal Sunday. But there are so many good reasons for us to take a few moments today to remember and to give thanks that Saint Francis of Assisi lived in this world, inspiring stories told about him, creating traditions for us to share, showing us how to pray in our own hard times, and teaching us to love this good earth, this glorious creation, and all God's creatures – the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, and, yes, sisters and brothers we meet each day wherever we turn.

ⁱ Watch me read “Saint Francis and the Wolf,” by Richard Egielski, @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3e-0YrTT3E>.

ⁱⁱ Br. Curtis Almquist @ <https://www.ssje.org/2015/10/04/the-feast-of-saint-francis-of-assisi-br-curtis-almquist/>.