

Joy: The Life of St. Francis Celebrating the Feast of St. Francis & the Blessing of Animals
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Arroyo Grande CA 10/4/20

“Most high, omnipotent, good Lord, grant your people grace to renounce gladly the vanities of this world; that following the way of blessed Francis, we may for love of you delight in your whole creation with perfectness of joy, through Jesus Christ our Lord...” (*Opening collect*)

JOY: Today is the Feast of St. Francis. The impression that I would like to leave you with in regard to this most beloved saint is the joy he experienced during his ministry. Joy is not the absence of sorrow but a lived experience of the presence of God. Joy is the mark of a Christian. And the way I would like to teach you about joy is through this icon of St. Francis. (*observe icon*)

CONTEXT: This icon was painted during the 13th century by Margaritone d'Arezzo, c.1270-80. The simplicity of the layout and sober colors reflect Francis' life of simplicity. As founder of the Franciscan mendicant order, he lived by its rule and wore its simple homespun habit and a three-knotted belt symbolizing the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Though born into an Italian family of wealth and privilege in 1182, Francis was captured as a prisoner of war at the age of 20. He languished in a Perugian jail, a dark, damp, inhospitable place where prisoners were poorly treated. It took almost a year before his father could raise enough money to ransom him. Francis returned to Assisi sick and chastened by his ordeal. This experience probably marked the start of his conversion to a life in Christ.

13th C Italy was a rough place to exist, being inundated by conflicts and wars, untreated diseases, intermittent plagues, and extreme poverty in the lower economic classes. At the beginning of the 13th C, the spirituality of the Church had grown old and tired. The severity of the dark ages had worn away the joy of Christianity, overshadowed by a focus on penance, austere living, and rote religious practice. It was into this context that Francis resurrected the true Spirit of Christ and joyfully spread the good news both by word and by deed.

Like the 13th C, we too are living in challenging times. Our country and the world are experiencing many conflicts, wars, plagues, fascism, environmental crises, racism, and economic distress. It would be tempting to fall into cynicism and despair, allowing fear to rob us of our joy. In fact, the loudest voices in the world right now are the ones running on the energy of fear, criticism, and cruelty. These voices of fear are not the ones we should focus on! After all, fear does not stop death. Fear stops life. And worrying does not take away tomorrow's troubles. It takes away today's peace.

So how do we cultivate joy in the midst of pain and uncertainty? The Dalai Lama advises: “If it is fixable, no need to worry. If it is not fixable, also no need to worry.” When going through a difficult time, keep in mind that everything is impermanent, and that the future holds possibilities that are not evident in the present. To foster joy, we need to be especially mindful of moments of well-being that arise and then offer a prayer of thanks. Such moments might include a note from a friend, a walk on the beach, a smile from your spouse, sharing a good book, or tasting a piece of pumpkin pie. Before going to sleep each night, list 5 things you are grateful for. Do not let your mind be kidnapped by the media and its fear mongering news. Rather pay attention instead to the goodness that is going on in the world.

Remember, it was a convergence of timing, sickness, disappointment, geography, and divine intervention that transformed Francis from a place of despair to a place of joy. We are more likely to experience daily joy by walking in his footsteps, imitating the giving and receiving of love while remaining mindful of the present moment. For joy is an attitude of the heart that is not dependent on external circumstances but is based on our relationship with God.

SIMPLICITY: If you take a look at this icon, Francis is in possession of only one item- a Bible. Living a life of simplicity allowed Francis to focus all of his energy and efforts in service to others. Not having an expensive home to maintain, a reputation to protect, possessions to guard, or a luxurious lifestyle to finance, he was free to enjoy the people, the opportunities, the creatures, and the beauty that God had set before him. And if we were to follow his example, we would realize that a simpler lifestyle can bring us much joy.

A simple lifestyle has many benefits. Simplicity and freedom go hand in hand. A simple life gives you the freedom to focus on what is important to you and let go of the rest. Fewer possessions and commitments result in less clutter as well as a smaller carbon footprint which can help in the fight against global warming. Imagine the free time you would gain if you did not have to spend so much time in keeping a complex life organized and dealing with all the things you don't need or want. If you are spending less, your finances are bound to be on more secure footing, and you will have more money to give to worthy causes and those in need.

By focusing on what is most important, your stress levels will be lower and your health will benefit. Stress can affect your mood, immune system, blood pressure, blood sugar, and mental health. People who live simply, have the bandwidth to focus on their health and watch carefully what they put inside their bodies. In summary, a life of simplicity frees us from the golden handcuffs of materialism that occupy our precious time and diminish our joy.

When I was in seminary, I was required to enroll in a 12-week chaplaincy program as part of my training. I packed my little car with kitchen necessities, clothing, and bedding and headed off to Yuma Arizona for a toasty summer. While the hospital provided housing, the only thing I needed to buy during this time away was a shower curtain and food. And because each of the chaplain interns had only brought a few possessions, we were motivated to share and to form more intimate bonds of friendship. Our focus shifted from acquiring and maintaining things to building relationships and serving others. As you embrace a simple lifestyle, you will find that simple things such as waking up rested, smelling the roses, chatting with your neighbors, and looking at the moon, can bring much joy. *(Insights by Stacy Brookman)*

IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST: While praying on the mountain of Verna in 1224, Francis had a vision when he received the stigmata, the wounds of the crucified Christ. *(See Icon)* The few people who have experienced these incarnate wounds are often those whose religious faith is so strong that their identification and love of Jesus becomes part of their physical reality.

Francis found God amidst the darkness of his time and happened to fall in love with God. It was as simple and as profound as that. Love is a tremendous motivating force that can move mountains. Because Francis was a lover of God, he was also a lover of humanity and of the creatures who inhabit our planet earth. His was an inter-species kind of love. That is why we bless our pets on his feast day. As his love relationship with God matured, Francis began to see the world as God sees it. Like God, Francis knew no boundaries and acted without fear. That is why he could call the sun, the moon, the animals, the poor, the lame, the leper, and the left behind as "*brother and sister.*" Being God's agent of love, Francis set out on a mission to bring back God's children to a real understanding of what it means to live a life of compassion. The message that he proclaimed was one of peace, simplicity, service to others, sacrificial love, inclusivity, and joy. Remember, joy is the final word in Christianity.

"Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy." Amen. *(Prayer attributed to St. Francis)*

