

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI, THE SUMMER SAINT!¹

Matthew 10: 5-20, 39

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

June 22, 2008

Google St. Francis of Assisi, and you will find 1,040,000 references to this medieval monk who died nearly 800 years ago at the age of 44! How many medieval saints would a Baptist church in the 21st century gladly celebrate? Not many, I would guess! But we have no trouble embracing Francis, for he is a saint for all people, a saint for all times, a saint for all denominations.

I

It's more than just the beauty of nature in early summer that makes us think of St. Francis. I contend that St. Francis is a saint for the most pressing problems of our contemporary times. He was, of course, bound within his time and culture, just as we are. He was superstitious; he was largely uneducated. In fact, he was in some ways rebellious! But contemporary political leaders would do well to pay attention to this little medieval monk in our day. He has much to say to us.

But let's start with the basics: the man we know as St. Francis was born into the plush surroundings of a wealthy home in the beautiful little village of Assisi, in Italy. His parents named him Giovanni, and he grew up

¹ © Thomas R. McKibbens, June 22, 2008.

dressed in the finest of clothes and entertaining his many friends with lavish dinners. His mother was French, and he grew to love the music of the French troubadours who entertained him and his playboy friends. So they nicknamed him ~~F~~Francis.“ He loved France. He was wealthy; he was sophisticated for his day; he was what we would call ~~s~~velte.“ He would have appeared on the front cover of magazines you see in the checkout line in the grocery store. He was one of the ~~b~~autiful people.“

But like anyone else, there came a time in his life when he had to come to terms with who he was and who he wanted to be in the world. And it all played out in one of the world’s most famous acts of teenage rebellion. Growing up in a home that was both conspicuously wealthy and conspicuously religious invites rebellion, especially when your family shows no compassion over the abject poverty all around them. And such was the case in the wealthy home in which St. Francis was raised.

The rebellion started with a harsh dose of reality. Francis joined the army. And like many a youthful private, he was anxious to go to war. But when war came, he discovered that war really is hell. He soon found himself a prisoner-of-war, thrown into a dark cell for a whole year, which left him plenty of time to think. When he was released and returned to his home in Assisi, he was a new person.

His family tried to get him involved in the old round of parties, but he was quiet, withdrawn, moody. They could see that something was not right, something was bothering him, but he wouldn't talk. Then one night he had a vision that he married Lady Poverty. Soon after that he was praying in the broken down church of San Damian, and he seemed to hear Christ say to him, "Francis, repair my falling house." He took that call literally, and sneaked into his father's silk warehouse, stole a bale of his father's expensive silk, and sold it to get the money to repair the little church of San Damian. His father, naturally, was less than thrilled!

Their relationship began to spiral downward until finally there was a public confrontation between father and son, both of them stubborn to the extreme, and neither of them willing to compromise. The sad result was that the father publicly disinherited and disowned his son, and Francis in turn renounced his father's wealth. One story has it that Francis not only handed his father his purse (full of his father's money), but also took off his expensive clothes, laid them at his father's feet, and walked away naked. From that day on, Francis renounced all material possessions and devoted himself to serving the poor.

In a time when lepers were kept at a distance and regarded with fear and disgust, Francis cared for them, fed them, bathed their sores, and even kissed them. He got his meals by scrounging in garbage and working as a

day-laborer, insisting on being paid not with money, but with bread and milk and eggs and vegetables. Soon a few companions joined him.

So, having married Lady Poverty, Francis and his few followers petitioned the Pope in the year 1210, and Pope Innocent III authorized the forming of what he called the Order of Friars Minor, commonly called the Franciscans. Soon the Franciscans discovered the biblical text that became the banner under which they would march to this very day. It happens to be the text we read today, when Jesus sends out the twelve disciples and says to them, *As you go, proclaim the good news...cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.*

II

At this point I want to stop and ask the obvious question: what difference does his life and witness make for us? What does this 12th century mystical monk have to say to 21st century urbanites who are busy trying to pay high gas bills and take care of business and attend meetings and catch a breath of fresh air in the summertime?

Two things...two things that the church needs to hear: First, there is an inescapable relationship between the gospel and the poor.

A challenging economic time such as this is the time for the church to shine. It is a time for the church to show its compassion and sensitivity to those in need. The church may not have a final solution to the suffering of the poor, but the church's calling is to live out a brighter vision than endless poverty, relentless war, and unbridled consumerism. The church is called to take action to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison, and welcome the stranger.

The church does not hold the reigns of political power; neither did Francis of Assisi. The church does not hold the wealth of the World Bank. But the church, like Francis and his followers, can bear a quiet yet powerful witness to the world. And Francis reminds us very clearly that when the church gets enamored with wealth and prestige, when the church sidles up too closely with the political forces of the world, when the church is more interested in protecting its assets than in helping the poor, then the church has lost its way and needs a St. Francis to call it back home.

Every generation needs its Francis of Assisi. Ours, of course, has had Mother Theresa, but in the Protestant world we have also had Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farms in Georgia. Out of Koinonia Farms came the idea for Habitat for Humanity. When Clarence Jordan died, the local funeral home would not even sell a casket to the family, so they buried Clarence in a piano box. But every time we

participate in building a home for the poor; every time we participate in preparing a meal for a homeless shelter; every time we give to the Food Bank; every time we help a refugee family get settled; every time we purchase a Hope for Housing grocery card, the voices of Francis and Mother Theresa and Clarence Jordan and ultimately of Christ himself are still heard in the land.

But that's not all. St. Francis not only has a contemporary word about the poor, he also has a contemporary word about making peace. Whoever said that peace can only come from raw power? In the year 1219, when Christians and Muslims were slaughtering each other in the Holy Land, Francis of Assisi went on his own to speak to the Sultan. With no diplomatic portfolio and no government endorsement, Francis had the naïve innocence of one who believed the scripture that says "Christ is our peace." So he crossed enemy lines without authorization and went to the Sultan's tent. Amazingly, he was received by the Sultan, Melek-al-Kamil.

Francis was able to convince the Sultan to agree to an armistice between the army of Islam and the army of Christianity. But to the deep disappointment of Francis, the Christian leaders would not agree, and the slaughter continued.

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace, he would pray... which is another way of saying, Lord, make me a peacemaker. Do not allow me to

be intimidated by calls for nationalism and blind patriotism and flags waving and bugles sounding and jets screeching. Lord, keep the task of peacemaking ever before the church in the spirit of Francis of Assisi. We need not be afraid any more than Francis of Assisi was afraid to enter the tents of the Sultan and defy the propaganda of those who think the only way to peace is through violence. His message to us today is to become instruments of peace, not instruments of war.

III

On October 3, 1226, at the age of 44, Francis of Assisi died in a chapel that he had rebuilt as a youth. It is said that he asked to be helped to sit up, and he looked toward the village of Assisi and said, "I have done my duty. Now, may Christ let you know yours! Welcome, sister Death!"

Between now and the time sister Death comes to meet each of us, I propose that we quietly determine what is truly important in this life, and then, simply and bravely, do it.