

Early 20th century English writer GK Chesterton once said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.”¹ Chesterton was a man who found that Christians, including himself, generally do not put their faith into action. But even the curmudgeon Chesterton would agree there was a notable exception.

‘Francis of Assisi, the saint who launched a million birdbaths, hundreds of thousands of statues, and the occasional service of Blessing of the Animals’² was, for Chesterton, the one Christian who actually *lived* the Gospel.

Francis, whose feast day was this past Friday, was the son of a wealthy silk merchant, whose story is almost the reverse of the Prodigal Son parable. He was known to dress in fine clothes, spend money lavishly, and behave in a ‘spirited’ manner. Once he decided to dedicate his life to the work of the Church, his decision was not welcomed and celebrated by his father, rather he was disowned. Francis remains famous today not because of his words and actions so much as because his words and actions conformed so closely to those of Jesus.

Francis didn’t have one big conversion experience ~ his path toward God took a series of turns closer and closer to God. As a boy, Francis dreamed of earning glory in battle. He got his chance at an early age when he enlisted, but he was almost immediately captured and imprisoned for about a year, during which time he became gravely ill and did a great deal of thinking about his life’s priorities. Once home, however, he quickly returned to his indulgent ways.

The course of Francis’ life was profoundly changed by at least two formative experiences. While selling fabrics for his father in the market square one day, a beggar outside of St. Peter’s Church in Rome approached him and asked for alms. After a few minutes, Francis abandoned his wares and ran after the beggar. When

¹ *What’s Wrong with the World*, chapter 5.

² The Rev. Frank Logue

he found him, Francis gave the man everything he had with him ~ his money, his clothing. He traded places with the beggar and spent the day begging for alms. His friends naturally mocked him, but when he got home, his father was enraged.³

Later he confronted his own fears of leprosy by impulsively hugging a leper. Like trading places with the beggar in Rome, this left a deep mark on Francis. Shaped by his experiences with the beggar and the leper, he had a strong identification with the poor. Francis cut himself off from the opulent lifestyle of his now estranged father and sought out a radically simple life.

Roughly 10 years later, Francis travelled to Egypt during the Fifth Crusade, hoping to convert the Sultan. Taken by the Muslim army, he was brought before the Sultan, and Francis greeted him by saying, “May the Lord give you peace,” which of course is remarkably similar to the Muslim greeting, “Peace be upon you.” The Sultan was disarmed by the gentle, warm presence of Francis, and he invited Francis to stay with him for several days. The two gentlemen regarded one another with deep respect and attempted to negotiate peace between their warring factions.

By the time of Francis’ death, the love of God had compelled him to accomplish much toward rebuilding the church. He changed thousands of lives by his call for repentance and simplicity of life. Yet, Francis of Assisi was simply a man transformed by the love of God and the joy that flowed from a deep understanding of all that God has done for us.

Francis’ approach to his life of Christian service fits with Jesus’ words to us in today’s Gospel reading when he tells those who follow him that they are to serve with no thought to reward. Francis served God well and at great personal cost: he accepted that his family and friends didn’t understand what he was doing or why, and he never accepted praise or reward for his work. Likewise, we are not to do works in the name of Christ in order to ‘earn stars in our crown,’ but simply because that is what we are called to do by virtue of our baptismal promises.

Yesterday, our parish prepared 20,000 meals for starving people around the world with our Muslim friends at the Islamic Society of Greenville. Feeding the hungry,

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_of_Assisi

uniting with our neighbors through shared values, recognizing the face and heart of God in and through our neighbors ... it was a beautiful, fun, *holy* day!

None of our work yesterday was about patting ourselves or each other on the back for feeding the hungry, or for joining forces with those of another religion, or for recognizing shared values. Our motivation was far bigger than self-congratulation – our motivation was to glorify God, to give thanks to God for all our many blessings, to help build God’s Kingdom one bag of rice and red hair net at a time. Our participation was no more and no less than our grateful response to God’s generosity to us ~ it was one more way to love God back.

Carrying the cross of Christ is a thankless task. And when we do so, we ironically discover that we benefit more than the people we help ~ that benefit namely being increased faith and increased capacity for love. We are to serve others as we serve Jesus, because that is the life God calls us to. Francis took his mustard seed of faith and used it to trust that he could trade places with a beggar, and discovered a deep compassion for the poor. Francis took his mustard seed of faith and used it to trust that he could hug a leper, though he was terribly afraid, and found the faith to work among lepers. And so, again and again, Francis’ steps of faith emboldened him to trust God more. It is the same for us. Each step of faith strengthens our trust in God to follow even more boldly. And our capacity for showing God’s love in the world grows exponentially.

To come back around to G.K. Chesterton, he advised, “Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.” That was Francis. When we live into the love of God, like Francis, we too will find Christianity will have been tried and not found wanting; it is not overly difficult and is so much more than a series of thankless tasks.

Walking the life of faith is simply an act of love. When we love God with all our heart and with all our mind and with all our strength, you and I join Francis in doing what we were called to do. We call ourselves servants knowing that what we do, we do for love, for the one who knows us fully and loves us more than we could ever ask or imagine.