

Tomorrow morning at our Sunday services we will welcome a guest preacher here to help us celebrate our patronal feast. Jesse Zink is a first-year seminarian at Yale Divinity School who is gathered with Jill and other “Friends of Bement” in Charlton tonight; so you all are stuck with me.

I confess that before coming to Holden nearly twelve years ago, I didn’t give a lot of thought to this twelfth century Umbrian. But his life story and the life of this congregation—and therefore my life as well, have become intertwined over these past years. I am grateful for that and imagine that is how it is meant to be with the communion of saints: they were lights in their generation and Francis was a particularly bright light in medieval Italy, a light that shines across the ages and in and through the work this parish church carries out in his name in these early years of the third millennium.

It was Francis who was responsible for creating the now familiar crèche and live nativities like the pageant we have here each Christmas. And he was “green” before it was cool, recognizing the interconnections of not only all of life but the cosmos itself: “brother sun” and “sister moon.” He recognized that human beings have a place in that circle of life as stewards, not abusers. It has been our practice for decades to offer a service of the Blessing of the Animals and we’ll do that tomorrow at 3 p.m. in the Memorial Garden. It is a chance for us to give thanks for our pets whom Francis would not have found it at all strange to consider “members of the family.” It’s a chance for us to recognize the compassion and gentleness of Francis and try to cultivate those traits in a world that could use a little more of both—and to share Francis with the wider communities of which we are a part.

Every week as I stand in this pulpit I look out at all of your smiling faces but I also see, week after week, the San Damiano cross on the back wall of this room. It’s the cross that Francis was meditating in front of when he heard Christ’s call to him: “rebuild my church, Francesco.” I love that and every October try in some small measure to recommit myself to that same work. It is easy to be discouraged about the Church and much harder to find ways to be part of the solution of rebuilding the Church in order to meet the needs of a changing world. I take great comfort in knowing that Francis didn’t do that alone but inspired others to share that work with him, *in community*. You and I are called to continue that work not only to honor Francis, but as fellow disciples of Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite stories about Francis is of his encounter with the Sultan, Melek-al-kamil, during the time of the Crusades. In 1219, Francis sailed across the Mediterranean to Egypt, where he was given a pass through enemy lines. There he stood before the Sultan to proclaim the Gospel. The Sultan politely replied that he had his own beliefs and that as a Muslim he was as firmly convinced of the truth of Islam as Francis was of the truth of Christianity.

Thomas Cahill has written about this encounter in an article entitled “The Peaceful Crusader,” published in *The New York Times* in 2006. He notes that “trying to proselytize a Muslim was cause for on-the-spot decapitation, but Kamil was a wise and moderate man, who was deeply impressed by Francis courage and sincerity and invited him to stay for a week of serious conversation.” Francis, in turn, was equally impressed by the religious devotion and compassion of the Sultan. Cahill then goes on to make this bold claim:

It is a tragedy of history that Kamil and Francis were unable to talk longer, to coordinate their strengths and form an alliance. Had they been able to do so, the phrase 'clash of civilizations' might be unknown to our world...Donald Spoto, one of Francis of Assisi's most recent biographers, rightly calls Francis the first person from the West to travel to another continent with the revolutionary idea of peacemaking...

It is this revolutionary commitment to peacemaking that I want to highlight this weekend. It goes to the core of the prayer attributed to Francis, *Lord, make us instruments of your peace*. It is way too easy for us to pray that prayer and let it hover in midair. But Francis let that prayer truly work through him and form him as a follower of Jesus Christ. If you've traveled to Assisi then you know that this global work of reconciliation continues as a witness to that "revolutionary commitment to peacemaking."

*The Book of Common Prayer*, says that "the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ" and that this mission is carried out "through the ministry of all of its members." (The Catechism, page 855) I don't know how we could possibly live into that mission without a deep awareness of who we are and a willingness to commit ourselves to the revolutionary idea of peacemaking—to allow ourselves to be used by God as "instruments of peace." That has to include a willingness to encounter the other, not in fear but with mutual respect.

Part of what I love about Francis' encounter with the Sultan is that he didn't sacrifice who he was as a Christian. We tend to have two very different approaches to the work of encountering the other in our culture, and I find myself less and less patient with both approaches as I grow older. For lack of a better term, I'll call the first approach the "liberal" approach, although I truly wish I had a better name for it. I think the instincts are right, but sometimes we act as if the primary goal is to never insult anyone. So we reduce our beliefs to the least common denominator: Christians and Jews and Muslims are all children of Abraham, we say, and leave it at that. We all worship the same God, after all. Now I don't want to mock this too much because I think the motivation is right, and it takes seriously that part of the Baptismal Covenant about "respecting the dignity of every human being." The problem is that only very rarely in such interfaith conversations (and even ecumenical conversations) do we dare to step beyond that common ground and out of our comfort zones to discuss our very real differences. Yet it is in exploring those differences that I think we discover real transformation and energy.

Conversely, the alternative approach (for lack of a better term I'll call it the more "conservative" approach) can tend to think that Christians are right and the other is wrong. Sharing the "good news" means we have it and they don't; so we do all of the talking and none of the listening. Since we have the truth, it is imperative that we make it clear to the other in order to "save" them. This approach tends to take seriously that part of the Baptismal Covenant about evangelism—proclaiming by word and example the good news of God in Christ—but I think forgets the claim of those early chapters of Genesis that all humankind (and not only Christians or Jews) is created in the image of God.

Everything I can find out about that encounter that Francis had with the Sultan in the Middle East in the thirteenth century, a time at least as polarized between Muslims and Christians as our own day—and even allowing for some historical revisionism—leads me to conclude that Francis offers a third way, a way that I think has much to teach us. It holds both of those two Baptismal claims

together: respect and dignity for the other while remaining clear about our own identity in Christ and the good news it brings not just to us but to the world.

For Francis, the way to God is clear: it is through Jesus Christ. And he certainly goes to the Middle East with a glad and generous heart to share that good news, even if it means he could lose his head, quite literally, in the process. But Francis remains open enough and humble enough and patient enough and kind enough and loving enough (all Christian virtues by the way) to be changed by that encounter with the Sultan. Even though neither one converts, both of them are enriched. In fact I want to propose that both men were even firmer in their own commitments after that exchange than they were before. But no longer could they caricature, or worse still, demonize, the other. They didn't discover they were the same because they were not the same! But they came to see their differences through a lens of mutual respect.

Last week I spent some time with my colleague, Pastor Dan Wilfrid, at a Lutheran-Episcopal conference. And this week I sat with some Roman Catholic students at Assumption College who are trying to find ways for Campus Ministry there to be more welcoming to Protestant students. Beyond these ecumenical conversations, as you know I've spent some time in conversation with Jews and Muslims both locally and beyond, sitting around a table discussing the Bible and the Koran.

I am convinced that we are not the same but also that we are trying to worship the same God, with God's help. I have never walked away from those conversations with the slightest desire to convert. In fact, my experience has been just the opposite: a renewed appreciation for the Way to God through Jesus, as passed on through the Episcopal Church I love and appreciate more than ever. But I have come away with what Krister Stendahl once called "holy envy" for the traditions of the other.

You and I don't have to travel half-way around the world, as Francis did, to encounter "the other." We live in a pluralistic society—Jews and Christians and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and Wiccans and doubters all around us. It is tempting to claim, on the one hand, a monopoly on the truth; or on the other, a complete relativizing of that truth.

But I think Francis invites us to find another way: to be who we are as ambassadors of Christ and as agents of reconciliation; to be instruments of God's peace by allowing Christ's light to shine through us.

But always, we are called to remember that this light of Christ reflects the love of the Creator for all of creation and that this Way of Christ is the Way of the Cross. To paraphrase St. Paul, there is nothing Christ-like about arrogance or rudeness or boastfulness or insisting on our own way. "Never boast of anything," we heard in today's reading from Galatians, "except for the Cross." That Way of the Cross calls us to a deep sense of humility about the faith we do possess; it calls us to love both God and neighbor, even the neighbor with whom we may disagree.