



When I arrived in Holden thirteen years ago, I could have basically written everything that I knew about Francis of Assisi on a cocktail napkin. I knew that familiar Zen-like pose of him preaching to the birds in many of our gardens. I knew about the Blessing of the Animals services that happen even beyond parishes that bear his name; my (second) favorite of which is held each year at St. John the Divine in New York City. (There, among other creatures great and small, the procession down the middle aisle during the main service today will include a yak, a tortoise, and a macaw.) I knew the portrayal of Francis as a 1970s “flower child” in Franco Zeffereli’s *Brother Son/Sister Moon*. And of course I knew the prayer attributed to Francis:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon:
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope
where there is darkness, light
where there is sadness, joy
O divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Since then, however, I’ve had an opportunity to ponder this singular life with greater intentionality when we celebrate our Patronal Feast Day every October. The San Damiano cross given to me when I was installed as your rector reminds me that each of us is called, by name, to share in the work of “rebuilding Christ’s Church.” In the past decade I’ve had an opportunity to read various biographies of Francis including an old one by Nikos Kazantzakis and a newer one by a journalist named Paul Moses. And a few years ago my family traveled to Italy and while there we made it a point to make a pilgrimage to Assisi. Over the course of these past thirteen years, I feel like I’ve moved past the usual clichés, and along the way “Frank” has become something of an old friend.

He was one of seven children born to Pietro and Pico di Bernardone. At his Baptism he was given the name Giovanni—after *Giovanni the Baptist*. But his father, a successful businessman, nicknamed him “Francesco” after his beloved France, where he did a fair amount of business travel. While they were a religious family (especially mom) the expectation was still clear: Pietro hoped that one day this son would join him in the family business. Imagine the old man’s dismay when Francesco broke it to him that he believed God had other plans for him. Everything we know about that relationship between father and son reminds us that before he was a statue in our gardens he was a real flesh and blood person, with all of the challenges and joys and heartache that are part of the deal of being human.

The scene in Frank’s life that I want to try to bring into focus today, however, is his encounter with Sultan Elek-al-Kamil in 1219.¹ For those whose history of the thirteenth century may need refreshing: this was a time when Christians from Europe got it into their heads that the Holy Land (which was at that point part of the Muslim world) ought to be recaptured. It was, in other words, the time of the Crusades. So Francis sails across the Mediterranean to Egypt where he is given a pass to travel behind enemy lines to meet this Sultan. He then stands in front of him to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ—with words.

Trying to proselytize a Muslim in the midst of the Crusades was grounds for on-the-spot decapitation. But Kamil was a wise and moderate man who was impressed by Francis’ courage and sincerity. And so when Francis finished telling the Sultan all about Jesus, Kamil replied:

Listen, Frank: I have my own beliefs. And as a Muslim, I’m as firmly convinced of the truth of my own faith as you are of the truth of Christianity. So can we just let that be? But listen: why don’t you plan to stay here for another week or so and we can get to know each other a little better?

And so he did. And over the course of that time together, Francis became equally impressed by the religious devotion and compassion of the Sultan. In other words, they both learned something about the other beyond all the propaganda. Both of them were changed.

We sometimes think that the world has changed so very much since the thirteenth century and clearly it has in a lot of ways. But in this area we seem pretty stuck. Our Baptismal Covenant includes both a promise to “proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ” and

¹ Thomas Cahill has written about this encounter in an article entitled “The Peaceful Crusader,” published in *The New York Times* in 2006.

that we “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” It’s tempting to see those as mutually exclusive claims, but they are not. To proclaim the good news we have experienced in Jesus must never come at the expense of sacrificing the dignity of others. Conversely, respecting the dignity of others doesn’t mean that we can’t ever speak of the love of God we have found through Jesus, sometimes with words.

It can be difficult to hold these two promises together. But it seems to me that Francis was able to model just the right balance in his encounter with the Sultan. For Francis, the way to God was clear. He was shaped by the Scriptures we heard today: the way to the Father is through the Son, and the way of the Son was about death on a cross outside of Jerusalem, a death that birthed a new creation. Francis travels to the Middle East because for him that good news brought about such radical change in his own life that he wanted to share it with others. For him, it was life-giving and holy and he wanted to preach that gospel at all times; even if it meant that in so doing he might lose his head.

Yet, without sacrificing his own deeply held convictions, Francis also remained open and willing *to listen* to the deeply held convictions of the other. That allowed him to engage a real person, not a straw man. He remained humble enough and patient enough and kind enough and loving enough to listen and not just talk. Preaching the gospel is not just about telling other people what we believe and then suggesting they ought to believe as we do. Francis respected the Sultan’s dignity as a child of God. When we listen, we are also saying something just as important—and maybe even more important—about our faith as when we speak.

In the end, neither one of these two men converted to the other’s faith. Yet clearly both were enriched by the authenticity of the encounter. And one cannot help but to wonder how the history of the world would be different if there were more Christians like St. Francis along the way (and fewer Crusaders); and more Muslims like Kamil (and fewer Jihadists.) Their encounter with each other didn’t make them any less committed to their own respective traditions. But no longer could they caricature, or worse still, demonize, the other.

Sadly, relations between Christians and Muslims don’t seem to have improved very much since that encounter. But there is one very big difference between St. Francis’ context and ours: you and I don’t need to travel to the Middle East to encounter Muslims. We just need to walk across the cafeteria to sit at a different table or across the street to visit and welcome a new neighbor to town. Or maybe we take a confirmation class over to Mountain Road for Friday prayers and conversation. Sadly, however, such conversations still remain rare in our own day. I recently read of a study that showed how ignorant Americans are of their own religious traditions, not to mention the traditions of others. We have a long way to go.

I want to believe that things aren’t as bad for Muslims in Worcester County as they are in parts of Florida or Tennessee these days. But when I am honest about it, I have to acknowledge that the current national climate must still make it way scarier for a second grade Muslim kid to get on the bus to go to school than it should ever be in this great nation that celebrates religious freedom. Do we yet understand that humanity and decency and compassion in the face of so much violence and mistrust are a far greater witness to our Christian faith than any words we

could ever speak? Francis let his light shine in his own generation; do we dare to find the courage and wisdom to follow his example in our own day?

Paul Moses² offers a compelling interpretation of the story about how our friend Frank “tamed” Brother Wolf at Gubbio. The story goes like this: the people of Gubbio, a town about thirty miles north of Assisi, were caught in the grips of fear because this terrible wolf was terrorizing the village. Francis, however, was able to get the wolf and the people of Gubbio to agree to a pact that led to terms of peace: Brother Wolf would stop terrorizing the people of Gubbio and they, in turn, would feed him. This is not just about Francis’ ability to talk to wolves like he did to the birds. Moses sees the story as an allegory: given the political state of affairs during the Crusades and the watchful eyes of the inquisitors, this is code language for the relationship between Europe and the Muslim world and Francis’ commitment to peacemaking on a global level. He suggests that Francis is pointing to a way beyond feeding fear by insisting that in the midst of a fearful world Christians can and must choose to be instruments of God’s peace by showing love of neighbor.

This takes us to the very heart of the St. Francis Prayer. It is too easy for us to pray that prayer and let it hover in midair. It’s easy to pray it and think only of an inward, spiritual peace. But as we allow the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, to cast out fear and misinformation in our own lives we are called to let it move through us as we live into our vocation to be instruments of God’s peace in the neighborhood and beyond. We are entrusted like Frank, with the ministry of reconciliation. Where there is hatred, we sow love. And where there is misinformation (and the bearing of false witness against our neighbor being spread on the internet) we dare to speak truth.

Francis let that prayer truly work through him to form him as a more faithful disciple of Jesus Christ who was willing to go behind enemy lines to engage to be an instrument of God’s peace. May we honor him, in this parish that bears his name, by following his good example: not only as people who love animals and care for the earth, but as people who preach the gospel at all times, even as we respect the dignity of all God’s children, for Christ’s sake and for the sake of the world.

² See Paul Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan: the Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace*, 2009.