



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

## St. Francis, Transformed

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 3, 2021*

*The Feast of St. Francis*

*Job 39:1-18; Galatians 6:14-18; Matthew 11:25-30*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

We don't really know what to do with saints. We say we love them, that we're inspired by them, that we revere them; but in all truth, they scare the ever-lovin' out of us. These bright shining examples of perfection have a way of illumining all our own imperfections, so we are left completely inadequate in their presence. Whenever we see saints carved in stone or written on an icon, we always know that even though they may claim our begrudging admiration, they're really nothing like us. In fact, when we say someone is "saintly," we're often just mocking them. It's a term to suggest someone is a kind of "goody two-shoes," that they have an unreal quality about them that makes them just a little "too-good-to-be-true."

It's the radical manner in which they live their lives that sets the true saints apart from the rest of us. It's not that the rest of us don't know how we should live; it's that we are amazed when someone actually does it. We know what we *should* do, but saints often do it in such intense and focused ways that those closest to them actually become worried about their sanity.

Take Francis for example. His father thought that he was out of his ever-lovin' mind! Born in 1182 in Assisi, Francis was the son of a wealthy silk merchant. He lived the privileged life of a child of the medieval mercantile class and wanted for nothing. Perhaps we're drawn to Francis in part because out of all those saints who lived youthful lives of piety and sacred devotion, Francis devoted his youth to the pursuit of pleasure. (Only Augustine, in Christian historical biography, competes with the libertine life of the young Francis.) He dressed too well. He drank too much. He loved too many and cared for too few.

His wealth and charismatic personality made him a leader of Assisi's youth, and when he grew older and dreams of glory on the battlefield enticed him to enlist in the war between Assisi and Perugia, no one could talk him out of it. But Francis was a lover, not a fighter. He wasn't cut out to be a soldier. He was captured in his very first military engagement and spent a year as a prisoner of war. Two years later he set out for battle again, this time, as Victor Narro writes, "as a young knight of a papal army bound for the Crusades. On his way to battle, he had a vision that caused him to become weak and very ill. He returned to Assisi unwilling to take up where he left off. He was ill for almost a year and he struggled with dreams and voices telling him to repair the Church that had fallen."<sup>i</sup>

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

This is a story of transformation for a church like ours that seeks to transform lives, transform the Church, and to transform the world. But this story is anything but romantic.

- Imagine the feelings of a father who believes he has lost his son. He was training him to take over the family business. Imagine the feelings of a mother who wanted her son to marry a nice girl, have some children, enjoy a good life.
- Imagine his father's friends thinking that Pietro di Bernardone dei Moriconi's son had lost his ever-lovin' mind to dreams and voices. Dreams and voices, indeed.
- Imagine all the tongues wagging around Assisi and what they would have said about an entitled son who appeared to throw it all away.

But his heart no longer dwelt in that body. St. Francis died some 800 years ago, but his first death actually took place when he could no longer live the life he had been given. He had to die to that life, and it is anything but easy to disappoint the expectations of those closest to you. The silk merchant's proud son began to dress more plainly. He began giving his extensive wardrobe to the poor. He began giving his money to any beggar who asked for it, and, infuriating his father even further, he began giving away not only his father's money but his merchandise! And so Francis, by the power of the Holy Spirit, created an entirely new "body" for himself—one in which he could survive. The old Francis had to die so that the new Francis could live.

- We all know we should live more simply and free ourselves from the materialism that strangles us.
- We all know meaning doesn't come from wealth or from possessing more and more things. And we all know that rather than possessing our possessions, our possessions can easily end up possessing us.

But most of us aren't willing to give away everything we own. And most of us who come from families of wealth aren't willing to risk alienating the patriarch or matriarch of the family by giving it away to the poor.

- We all know we should care for all created beings, especially for the animals who depend upon our care.
- We all know we are called—compelled by our humanity—to care for the whole of Creation, this increasingly "fragile earth, our island home." Yet so few of us have changed our habits or life-styles to a degree that would make a positive impact on the environment.

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* And we are so desperate for rest.

It used to be a little harder for faith communities to think of the "Stewardship of the Earth" as a clear moral imperative. People used to wonder if climate change was a genuine concern, and, if it was, what could anyone ever do about it anyway. But in the year 2021, there's precious little room for doubt. Creation care is a theological mandate with little opposition and a lot of energy behind it. And there are so many things one can do.

The blessing of the animals which we do on this day is such a heartwarming liturgy because we are all being introduced to members of your extended family. And there's nothing like a pandemic to remind us of our need to connect to one another and our need for companionship with our pets. The cat who comes to sit in our lap. The dog who brings a toy to be thrown. The hamster who makes us laugh by running round and round on his wheel. Are these not little "outward and visible signs" of God's love and care for us? In this moment, aren't we more compelled than ever before to respect the biosphere we occupy or risk losing everything?

I loved a story I read on the internet about a chocolate jar placed at the Smiths Station Animal Hospital in Smiths Station, Alabama. On the jar are the words, "Goodbye kisses." The Hersey Kiss chocolates are reserved for the dogs who will be euthanized at the Lee County vet clinic. Alongside the jar, Dr. Nicole Namie, one of the three veterinarians at the hospital, wrote, "This jar is reserved for our euthanasia appointments, because no dog should go to Heaven without tasting chocolate." That clinic's pastoral care for families (and their pets) connected with animal lovers worldwide, who know that while chocolate isn't good for dogs, at the end of their life, it's a bittersweet last treat."<sup>ii</sup>

In some ways, it may be the "pacifist Francis" who's the most difficult identity to comprehend in our culture. "In the summer of 1219 in the midst of a Crusade that was killing thousands of people in the sweltering heat on the banks of the Nile, Francis was warned by leaders of the Christian army not to cross the bloody battlefield between the two armies to seek out the Sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Kamil. But Francis and his traveling companion, Friar Illuminato, crossed the battlefield, and were seized by Muslim soldiers who took the two barefoot monks, dressed in worn-out patched brown tunics, to appear before the Sultan. When Sultan al-Kamil saw Francis' desire to share his spirituality and message of peace with the Sultan, without insulting Islam or refuting Mohammed, al-Kamil asked him to stay with him and they spent almost four days together in mutual respect and understanding. They both shared a meal together and the image of Francis peacefully breaking bread at a banquet with al-Kamil, indicated the appreciation they had for one another and the respect they shared for their differences.

"As Francis prepared to leave, it's said that the Sultan showered him with many gifts and treasures, which Francis refused because he had no interest in worldly wealth. He kept only one special gift; an ivory horn used by the muezzin to call the faithful people to prayer. Francis later used it to call his people for prayer or preaching and I think that is such a wonderful image for respectful interfaith dialog between different faiths across great differences."<sup>iii</sup>

Francis himself once explained how he understood the role of the order of Franciscans he had founded in a profoundly broken world. "Since you speak of peace, all the more so must you have it in your hearts. Let none be provoked to anger or scandal by you, but rather may they be drawn to peace and good will through your gentleness. We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost their way."<sup>iv</sup>

Come to me, all you who have lost your way.

Come to me all you who are tired of sickness and death.

Come to me, all you who are wearied by variants and vaccinations.

Come to me, all you who are exhausted by zero-sum politics.

Come to me, all you who are carrying heavy burdens of unforgiveness and guilt.

Come to me, all you who are in search of a place to finally call home. Come. Come.

And the God of all that has ever been and all that is now and all that ever will be will find rest for your souls.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Victor Narro, "The Relevance of Saint Francis of Assisi," *LA Progressive Newsletter*, October 4, 2016

<sup>ii</sup> WRLB, Channel 4, Posted: Sep 27, 2021 / 02:15 PM CDT / Updated: Sep 27, 2021 / 01:40 PM CDT, SMITHS STATION, Ala.

<sup>iii</sup> Op Cit. Narro, p. 2-3, (adapted)

<sup>iv</sup> Wendy Murray, *Patheos*, "Remembering St. Francis," *patheos.com*, October 4, 2013,

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