

SLD08.06.06 18th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
John 6:24-35
Ezekiel 36:22a, 23-28

“A New Heart”

This morning we continue this summer’s practice of focusing on the lives of various Christians outstanding for the ways in which they integrated the principles and imperatives of the gospel of Jesus Christ into their everyday existence. For whereas we of the Reformed Protestant tradition, believing as we do that before God everyone is equally saint and sinner, don’t go for the practice of canonizing individuals, yet we’re not so arrogant as to imagine we can’t learn something from those radical, God-smitten ones who came before us.

Anyway, the lives of the saints often make for good stories. And if some of them strike us as sort of nutty, we might do well to remember that Jesus often struck *his* contemporaries as sort of nutty, especially those who loved him best. “Holiness” often appears foolish to the status quo, maybe because it does not spring from our ordinary impulses, but from *God’s* impulses planted and percolating in us. “The nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through *you* I display *my* holiness before their eyes.” (Ez. 36:23b)

I like to think of an occasional visit with the odd fool for Christ as a sort of tonic for us thoughtful, reasonable, North American Presbyterians, a kind of bracing reminder of the “new heart” and “new spirit” God is forever trying to spark in us. Like the Apostle Paul said to his new church in Corinth, “If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God.” (I Cor. 3:18b-19)

So the fool for Christ with whom I'd like us to visit today is St. Francis of Assisi. And next week we'll pay a visit to foolish Francis' soulmate, kooky Clare.

Now most of you have heard of St. Francis and if you think of him at all, you likely regard him as this sort of benign sweet guy who embraced poverty, talked to animals and routinely posed for bucolic garden statuary. And then there was that 60's song and movie, *Brother Sun and Sister Moon*, which offered a sort of airbrushed, romantic portrayal of the relationship between Francis and Clare.

But, you know, an aura of romance really does surround the story of Francis' life. Born in 1182 in the town of Assisi in the province of Umbria, Italy, Francis grew up in an era of passionate spiritual romanticism, when the imaginations of the literate were often captivated, even obsessed, by the mystical, quixotic tales of King Arthur and his round table, the quest for the Holy Grail, and the antics and music of those roving, love-sick European poets called the troubadours. In fact, so smitten was Francis with the gospel of Jesus Christ, there came a time when he himself was called The Troubadour of God.

Born into a wealthy family, Francis was, by the age of 22, rich, famous, well-liked, and bored out of his ever-loving mind. Despite his privilege, or maybe because of it, he began to despair of the emptiness of his days and of his heart. Fragile in constitution, Francis became depressed and ill until one day when he had a dream, a vision, a romantic call to chivalry that, as one author puts it, "freed him from his own frozen will."¹

The dream placed Francis in a dazzling palace where a radiant princess-bride held court. The walls of the palace were covered with shields and trophies of battles

¹ Bodo, Murray, Francis, The Journey and the Dream, St. Anthony messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1988, p.5.

won. And in the dream, Francis asks aloud who the Lord of the castle is. A voice sings out, "it is the high court of Francis Bernardone and his followers."

Well, that was all it took for ole' goofy, fragile, foolish Francis to festoon himself in knightly togs and go forth to seek his glory. Now, the best way to go forth and seek glory in those days was to join the papal armies of a local Norman captain who happened to be winning brilliant battles in the service of Pope Innocent III. Thing is, you know how dreams can sometimes be misinterpreted? Having neither the build, the skill, nor the disposition for the martial path, Francis made for a dismal soldier.

Another dream comes along and in this one, a voice asks, "Yo, Francis, is it better to serve the Lord or the servant?" "It's better to serve the Lord, of course!" "Then why," asks the voice, "are you trying to turn your Lord into a servant?"

Oops. In his impatience to "get things right," apparently Francis has acted too quickly, tried to take too much into his own hands, and ended up serving his own desire for glory more God's will for him. So Francis turns around and goes home.

Only the thing is, knights don't go home. When did Sir Lancelot ever check in with his mom, even for a change of underwear? Not only was Francis mortified, the citizens of Assisi were scandalized by his behavior and scorned him to his face. Embarrassed and humiliated, Francis withdrew to a cave up in the Umbrian hills and prayed as he had never prayed before, begging Jesus to tell him why He had asked him to return to Assisi. An answer never came.

At first Francis' inner search was a painful and terrifying look at ...his weakness and sinfulness. The journey was a downward dive that made Francis feel as though he were drowning in some vast, bottomless lake. But as he persevered in prayer, Francis came at last to something like a great, silent waterproof cavern. ...and there at that depth within, Jesus spoke softly to him and made his heart burn with love. Afterwards he would soar to the surface

again, renewed and encouraged. But each time he had to make the painful and frightening dive. And each time he was afraid he would not be able to find the cavern again.

During that whole year, Francis went to the cave outside Assisi and plumbed his own depth trying to bring that inner cave-peace to the surface permanently. In the end, he sensed somehow that the search for the cavern would be his daily journey for the rest of his life; and if he were to be at peace, he would have to delve deeply in prayer every day.²

And so it was that Francis became a man of prayer, delving deeply into prayer every day for that new heart that would fuel and direct his activities for the rest of his life. When he emerged from his cave, he set out once more as a knight, only this time dressed in a sackcloth robe with a cross chalked on the front and back and a rope tied around his waist. And this time, Francis' quest was to live a holy life of joy, poverty and service.

That was how Francis felt about his new life, anyway. But others around him just thought he was silly. Or annoying. Or a harmless madman. But Francis held everything in his heart with the enthusiasm of a child. From his nutty perspective, what he was doing was taking up residence in himself, becoming "a portable kingdom" – ready to move along the highways of the world to bring people to Christ.

Instead of starting big, Francis had begun to think small. Instead of starting with forces and people outside, Francis had decided to start with himself³ and do everything in his power to re-create in his own person the life of Jesus on earth. He knew he couldn't do much on his own but he also knew that his transformation was not his but God's work. And God said, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ...I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my

² Ibid, pp 8-9.

³ Ibid, p. 34.

spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ez. 25, 26b-27) So Francis didn't worry. If his life were to be transformed into the life of Jesus, God would give him the new heart and spirit necessary to do so.

And what do you know but that, peculiar as Francis was, his childlike enthusiasm, his unbridled love for Christ, and his literal response to God's call became contagious and people started joining his odd adventure of putting the Word of God into practice. A community of brothers formed around Francis, whom he promptly sent right back out again to challenge the pervasive complacency and smugness in the church of his day. Francis wanted to shake everybody up and make them wonder in their hearts, "What should be my response to these fools? ...And his prayer day and night was that God would give everyone the courage to be themselves instead of what others expected them to be."⁴

So there you have it: a brief glimpse of Francis Bernardone, a poor ragged sparrow of a man who fell in love first with God and then with God's creation. A man of prayer who, when it came to putting God's Word into practice, worked first on himself and then on his community. A courageous knight who gave his life to living the gospel. A dyed-in-the-wool, self-proclaimed fool for Christ through whom God displayed God's holiness to the nations.

No question but that the guy was a nut – as eccentric a member of God's Squad as any produced. But isn't there something about Francis' passion, his freedom, his obedience, his joy, that calls to us? That calls to our world?

I want to close with a story about an encounter Francis had with the Sultan of Egypt. Whether it is fact or legend, I do not know, but it is full of truth, both for his day

⁴ Ibid., p 40.

and for ours. Hear this tale of a 12th century Christian-Muslim encounter.

(www.bruderhof.com/articles/francis-sultan.htm)

A great army of Francis' countrymen had come to Egypt to fight the Muslims. They were on a crusade to win the Holy Land from the Turks and were killing many people. Francis saw people starving, little children dying, and wondered what he could do to stop the terrible massacre.

He decided first to go the Cardinal Pelagius, the Christian commander of the army. "Please, Lord Cardinal," he said, "stop the fighting. People are starving. People are dying without even having heard that Jesus loves them. And they are dying because of us Christians.

But Cardinal Pelagius would not listen. "We are killing these people for a good reason," he said. "We must conquer them so the church will be powerful. When the church is strong it will be able to conquer evil."

"But the Lord Jesus did not ask us to strive for worldly power," replied Francis. "God uses the weak, not the powerful."

"Ridiculous!" cried Cardinal Pelagius angrily, dismissing the poor man from Assisi without a further word.

Since the Christian commander would not listen to him, Francis decided to go to the enemy commander, the great Muslim Sultan Al-Kamil, to plead for peace. The Sultan was a cruel man who had vowed that no Christian would ever leave his presence alive. But Francis was not afraid of him for death would only bring Francis into the presence of his Lord.

Calmly Francis started out one morning to walk to the enemy camp. He looked so small and so poor and unimportant in his threadbare cloak that the Sultan's soldiers let him pass.

As Francis neared the gates of the palace, the Sultan, bedecked with jewels and followed by his retinue and crowds of people, came galloping down the road.

"Soldan! Soldan!" shouted Francis to attract his attention.

The foreign pronunciation of the word 'Sultan' caught Al-Kamil's attention. He pulled his horse to an abrupt halt and looked at Francis with his piercing black eyes.

"Did you come from the Christian camp?"

"Yes, I did," replied Francis, smiling happily.

“I knew it!” cried the Sultan. He turned to his guards. “This fellow is a Christian!”

The guards, with daggers between their teeth, leapt upon Francis.

“Stop!” said the Sultan. “Don’t kill him yet. Bring him into the palace. I want to find out what brought him here.”

Soon Francis sat on the floor in front of the great Sultan.

“So!” exclaimed Al-Kamil, “did they send you over here to kill me?”

“Oh, no,” said Francis. “No one sent me. I just came myself to ask you to end the war. Our commander won’t listen to me, so I came to you.”

The Sultan couldn’t believe his ears. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

“What is your name, and where do you come from?” he asked.

“My name is Francis, and I came from the town of Assisi in Italy.”

“Well, Francis of Assisi, what do you want me to do?” asked the Sultan, amused. “Hand over Egypt to the enemy and let my people starve?”

“Oh no,” replied Francis earnestly. “Egypt belongs to you. But you must do something else that would put an end to the war.”

“What is that?” asked the Sultan.

“Why, you must become a Christian,” said Francis simply.

The Sultan broke into a gale of laughter. “Become a Christian!” he howled. “You know I will torture you, don’t you? Aren’t you afraid to suffer?”

“Our Lord suffered for us. Why should I not suffer for him?” asked Francis.

“Your God suffered?” asked the Sultan, surprised.

“Yes, he suffered more than we can understand. He laid down his life for us. That is why we love him so much.”

“Fair enough,” said the Sultan, “but why should I love him when he did nothing for me?”

“Oh, but he did it for you, too!” cried Francis. “He knows you. He loves you. You are his beloved child!”

Francis spoke with such conviction that the Sultan became thoughtful. "What does your God require you to do?" he asked.

"Nothing, except that we love him," said Francis. "God wants us also to love everyone and share what we have with others."

"Ah," said the Sultan. A long time ago we had a teacher in our midst who spoke about your faith as you do. But we have never found Christians to be like that. Christians are untruthful and cruel. They fight among themselves like wild animals. The stories about your faith are not true."

"Unfortunately there are evil Christians," said Francis. "Human nature is weak. But God's mercy has no limits. Through God the most wicked can become holy."

The Sultan sighed. "You may go now," he said. I will not kill you. Indeed, I will even reward you for the interesting conversation I have had with you. Take all the gold you can carry."

"Gold!" exclaimed Francis, horrified. "I don't need gold."

"Well," said the Sultan, "that is the first time I have ever seen a Christian who does not want gold! What do you want then?"

"I would like very much to visit the Holy Land where our Lord lived when he was here on earth. Would you allow me to do so?"

A crafty look came into the Sultan's eyes. "Yes," he said. "I will even send a slave with you to take you as far as our borders. Remember, however, the slave belongs to me and you must send him back."

Francis nodded. "I will send him back," he said.

The Sultan turned to one of his guards. "Have one of the Christian slaves brought," he said. "He shall accompany this man to our border."

"But the slave will escape!" gasped the guard.

"Do as I tell you," shouted the Sultan. "We will see," he said to himself, "whether this Christian can be trusted. We will see whether he will send the slave back."

On many days the great Sultan Al-Kamil, with a wistful look in his eyes, asked his servants, "Has the slave that I sent with the Christian Francis of Assisi returned?"

"No, not yet, O great Ruler."

The Sultan stared out the window. "I thought this man was different from the rest. I thought he was a real Christian. But I was wrong. They are all alike. All are false. All are untruthful. There is no such person as a true Christian.

Just then a guard came in, bowing low. "Oh, great Ruler, I just want to report to you that the slave has returned," he said.

"Ah, said the Sultan. "So Francis of Assisi kept his word after all. Good! You may go."

Some time later, the Christian army was defeated. The commander, Cardinal Pelagius, who had hoped to make the church more powerful, now stood in bitter humiliation before the Sultan. "Let our twelve thousand men go home," he begged.

"Listen to me," said the Sultan. "I vowed that not one of you Christians should remain alive; that I would kill you all. Nothing you could say would have changed my mind. But some time ago a man by the name of Francis of Assisi came to me from your camp. I think highly of him."

Cardinal Pelagius looked up, startled. He vaguely remembered the foolish little man.

"He is the one and only man whose deeds showed me that the words about your faith are true," continued the Sultan. "For his sake, and for his sake alone, mind you, I will spare your lives. You may all go – you as well as all my Christian slaves. I want Francis of Assisi to remember me well."

"The nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes." (Ez. 36:23b)

Friends, may there come a day when Francis of Assisi will remember us well.

To the glory of God. Amen.