

**SLD08.28.11 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sacred Communities Series    The Franciscans**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 18:1-5**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Tea With My Chicklets, or Charmed and Disarmed”**

Matthew 18: At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”<sup>2</sup> He called a child, whom he put among them,<sup>3</sup> and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>4</sup> Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>5</sup> Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

We turn this morning to the community of the Franciscans, members of the mostly Roman Catholic religious orders founded by Saint Francis of Assisi. St. Francis is a great favorite here at EPC, especially on the occasion of our annual Blessing of the Animals. So since this summer we’re focusing on sacred communities instead of individuals, it makes sense for us to turn to the community that grew out of St. Francis’ disarming faith and revelation.

There are actually a number of different groups spawned over the centuries that call themselves Franciscans but the most prominent is called The Order of Friars Minor.<sup>1</sup> I learned in my study that the Franciscans are not a monastic order but a mendicant apostolic order founded in the late Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Which means exactly what? wondered my Protestant self.

Well, replied Google, a mendicant is basically a beggar. Friars or mendicants profess poverty and do not possess property. They’re free to move about outside their community and evangelize or teach or work in the outside world. While they’re

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franciscan>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~dvess/ids/medieval/franciscan.html>

assigned to different friaries or convents, they do not promise stability to a particular place.<sup>3</sup>

Now that's my kind of apostalate – no promise of stability. That's what I should have put in our contract – I promise to love you but I do not promise stability.

Anyway, in contrast, monks and hermits are characterized by their “installation” in one monastery or abbey or another. Monks, or their community, maintain ownership of their property and are generally both self-governing and self-sufficient. In contrast, those unstable mendicants live on alms and the generosity of the faithful.

Another characteristic of the Franciscans, as opposed to such contemplative orders such as the Benedictines, Carmelites, and Trappists, is that the “active” Franciscans tended to be more out and about, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and generally going around praising God.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas many religious orders ground their lives in the experience of the early Christian community in Acts 2 (remember we started this sermon series with the early Christian church as revealed in Acts 2), the Franciscans intend instead to ground their lives in the poor and crucified Christ.<sup>5</sup>

So, the Franciscans are a bit less “stable” than the other orders, and tend to wander around a good bit. The mendicants’ free and independent living – free of both material possessions and a place to lay their heads – their peripatetic preaching and teaching, their risky, free-wheeling, and arguably foolish way of life, seems pretty

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<sup>3</sup> <http://abbey-roads.blogspot.com/2010/09/main-difference-between-mendicant-friar.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.religious-vocation.com/differences\\_religious\\_orders.html](http://www.religious-vocation.com/differences_religious_orders.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://franciscans.org/index.cfm>

consistent, does it not, with what we learned about St. Francis? Because if anyone was a “fool for Christ,” it was Francis of Assisi.

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 adventures of those roving, love-sick European poets called the troubadours. So smitten was Francis with the gospel of Jesus Christ, he came to be called The Troubadour of God.<sup>6</sup>

Francis himself sets out as a knight of sorts, only dressed in a sackcloth robe with a cross chalked on the front and back, and with the quest to live a holy life of joy, poverty and service. This is how *Francis* feels about his new life, anyway. Most of the people around him just think he’s silly. But Francis holds everything in his heart with the enthusiasm of a child, taking seriously Jesus’ admonition that unless he become like a child, he will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And what Francis wants, in his child-like way, is to become a sort of “portable kingdom,” ever ready to move along the highways of the world to bring people to Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Besides, Francis doesn’t regard his behavior is any more foolish than, say, the scriptural notion of his all-powerful God dying on a tree for love of humanity. God’s love is foolish, too – profligate and unreasonable. Francis not only grasps but delights in God’s foolish love, forever turning for examples of it to the animals around him.

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<sup>6</sup> Sermon from SLD09.19.10 25th Ordinary Blessing of the Animals, Emory Presbyterian Church, I Corinthians 1:18-31, Jill Oglesby Evans, “Puppy Love,” p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.4

Take a puppy, for example. What else *is* a puppy but a gnawing mouth and floppy paws and tumbly skin encasing boundless energy and sloppy love? A virtual waterfall of affection, splattering as much outside the bowl as in, a puppy loves totally, indiscriminately, foolishly, anyone who so much as glances his way. And that, Francis would say, is how God loves.

And what do you know but that Francis' head-over-heels, bumbling, stumbling response to God, together with his unbridled puppy love for Christ, becomes contagious and people started joining his odd adventure of putting God's Word into practice. A community of brothers forms around him, whom he promptly sends right back out again to challenge the pervasive complacency and smugness in the church of his day. ...And his prayer every day becomes that God give everyone the courage to be themselves instead of what others expect them to be."<sup>8</sup>

But, you know how it goes when the founder leaves. Now that Steve Jobs has left Apple, it's flat not going to be the same company, is it? Likewise, it wasn't long after Francis of Assisi passed to glory that the Franciscans started morphing into something a bit different than he might first have envisioned.

Oh, they put together a Rule, of course – you recall, a spiritual document that outlines the way a particular community will go about living the Gospel, like the Covenant of this church. The Franciscans' Rule included poverty, chastity and obedience, and the expectation of clothing themselves plainly and living in simplicity. In exchange for their service or work, they could accept anything necessary for their own temporal needs, but generally speaking, they were meant to live in this world as pilgrims

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<sup>8</sup> Bodo, Murray, Francis, The Journey and the Dream, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1988, p.40.

and strangers (*Mt. 10.27:29*), materially poor but rich in virtue, and to be concerned only to serve, love, and adore God.<sup>9</sup>

Only on the matter of possessions, well, as we all know, it's flat hard to maintain a church without a reasonable budget. So it should come as no surprise that in the eight centuries of the Franciscan movement, certain individuals and orders have come down differently on the matter of material wealth. In point of fact, the eight centuries of the Order are actually rife with conflict and reorganization related to the decline over time of various elements of the Order's initial fervor. Concerns over laxity, or lack of discipline, resulted in reform after reform, usually with a call for return to the stricter discipline of the earliest order.

Indeed, which orders were or are most directly following the manner of life that St. Francis intended has forever been a matter of considerable debate. There are those who argue that the Friars Minor, the largest contingency of the Order, are in fact, the furthest removed from St. Francis' original spirit and practice. "It is not uncommon today, for example," one author notes, to see friars watching television or going to the movies and eating ice cream on a Friday night.<sup>10</sup> (Whaturyagonnado?)

Today, the Franciscans' website reads that Franciscan spirituality strives to follow the poor and crucified Christ by living his gospel in community. "...Humility, poverty, and charity are lived out in our life together without anything of our own. In a life of poverty, ...we learn again and again that we need one another, that we can only fully experience humility and charity in relationship with one another."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.franciscanfriarstor.com/archive/theorder/Holy%20Rule/stf\\_holy\\_rule\\_chapters\\_1-9\\_with\\_commentary.htm](http://www.franciscanfriarstor.com/archive/theorder/Holy%20Rule/stf_holy_rule_chapters_1-9_with_commentary.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> <http://franciscans.org/index.cfm>

We know about that, don't we. How we can only fully experience humility and charity in relationship with one another?

But I tell you, as I was researching the Franciscans this week I found myself continually getting brain burn from all the Order's endless conflicts and reforms and branches and bossy, competitive monks. Here, certainly, was a case where it was a whole lot harder to mine inspiration from the community than from the founder. (If only because it's easier to romanticize an individual than a community. Case in point. How many times have you heard someone say, "I like Christ all right; it's the Christians I have a problem with.")

Weary of grumpy monks and competing theologies, I actually started getting a little discouraged, actually; How am I ever going to preach this? I wondered. To give myself a break, I kept going out to the back and sitting with my chicklets and just watching them. Just watching them be themselves – simple, silly, guileless, goofy - and found my discouragement just melting away.

"Unless you change and become like chicklets," I thought to myself, "you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Pets help us that this way. Whoever becomes humble and needy like Annie, whoever is aged and dependent like Stella, whoever perseveres and demands sustenance like Jilly, whoever struts her stuff like Sophie, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. You get the idea. However hard it is to live out the gospel (just ask any followers of Francis or Jesus, either one) both guys were on to something. It's not the powerful and the competent and clever who manage their way into the kingdom, it's the least of these.

You know, a couple months ago Larry Owens, Presbyterian pastor and friend of this church, sent out a random e-mail on the topic of St. Francis, and in it he noted that, "A thousand years ago, the Church was pretty tired. Dying, some would say. It had gone through the Dark Ages doing little more than stubbornly reciting the creed as it fought the Barbarians. When suddenly into that old, ordered and settled Church came a happy Troubadour who tumbled his way into the hearts of people, wearing nothing but the foolishness of God. Captivated by the message of the cross, this visionary vagabond ...slipped easily through the thick nets that threaten to entangle us all and swam upstream to serenade us...home."<sup>12</sup>

This, I feel, is the gift St. Francis gives us, and that we give one another here at Emory Church through our Annual Blessing of the Animals service, when suddenly, into this old, ordered and settled Church pad the precious beasts who have tumbled their way into our hearts, slipping easily through the thick nets that threaten to entangle us, to remind us of God's boundless energy and sloppy love. And what greater gift can anyone or anything offer?

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> From Larry Owens' e-mail on 6/10/11