

## Everyday Mysticism: Everyday Peacemaking (Francis of Assisi)

Matthew 5:1-10

Philippians 2:1-8

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If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind (lit. "attitude") be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

This is the word of the Lord

This morning, as part of our learning to be everyday mystics, we're talking about being peacemakers. Not that the world or our society needs peace these days... Since we're receiving the Peace and Global Witness offering, and celebrating worldwide communion Sunday this morning, this is a fitting theme for today—and every day!. And it's a fitting theme because...

Every year, October 4<sup>th</sup> (which was last Friday) is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of Italy, of animals and nature, and of campy lawn ornaments and garden statues. Francis is just the right guide for us into everyday

peacemaking, and while we will hear some familiar material about Francis, and from him, we'll learn a new thing or two about him, and discover that there is a salty side to this saint as well, and some of his guidance might pinch just a little bit.

Francis of Assisi was a dedicated peacemaker—we have his beloved prayer, “Make me an instrument of your peace,” which we will sing at the end of the service. Francis lived his everyday peacemaking by caring for impoverished people, orphans, widows, societal outcasts, and he founded a *movement* of those who live lives of simplicity in the world for the sake of others.

Although there is a Catholic order of Franciscans named after him (and a Pope who took on his name), Francis never wanted or intended any of his followers to become priests. He rejected the hierarchy of the church, and wanted everyone to be on level ground together, because he believed everyone was equal. But, of course, after he died, what did they do? They created an order of priests called Franciscans. What is it about us humans that we have this need to take a simple movement and make it into an organization with a pecking order?

Francis himself was not a priest, but a modestly educated lay person who dedicated himself to peacemaking, simplicity, and humility, vowing to follow the way of Christ in every way possible; this Christ, who Francis loved to remember,

was gentle and humble of heart. He was a man of the earth, as is well known. So much so, that when he was at the point of death he asked to be taken from his bed and laid directly on the earth.

Born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, Francis was raised in a wealthy family in Assisi, Italy, the son of a cloth merchant. He received little formal education and during his youth was mostly preoccupied with having fun. As a young man, he was popular, winsome, enjoyed practical jokes and was usually the life of the party. Because of his great wealth, he usually picked up the tab at the pub and thus attracted a following of fun loving, rowdy young men and women.

However, when armed conflict broke out between the people of Assisi and a neighboring city in 1202, Francis eagerly volunteered for the cavalry but wound up getting captured after the first big battle and spent a year in captivity.

When the conflict ended, Francis returned to Assisi hailed as a hero, but unknown to his friends and family he had undergone a transformation in his heart and mind and his entire outlook on life during his captivity. Although he was once again the life of the party, he was now questioning his reason for existence.

After much contemplation, including mystical encounters with God in nature and in dreams, he turned away from the pursuit of all worldly pleasures, sold all of his personal property, and donated the money to the Church.

Then, an event changed his life even further and solidified his commitment to live a life of simplicity and service. While riding his horse along a road near Assisi, he met a man afflicted with leprosy. Though the sight of the leper was grotesque to him and filled him with fear, Francis felt compelled to get off his horse, and he approached and then kissed the leper. Then the leper put out his hand, hoping to receive something. Out of compassion, Francis gave him what coins he had left.

But when Francis mounted his horse again and looked all around, he couldn't see the leper anywhere. He knew, then and there, that it was Jesus whom he had just kissed.

Francis believed in divine appointments like this, and saw these kinds of experiences as essential to his spiritual life. After this particular one with the leper, he then began a lifelong commitment of caring for society's castoffs, the sick and poor.

So, along with experiencing God in *nature* and in *contemplative prayer*, Francis believed that the work of peacemaking, in the form of service, was also a way to experience mystic union with God. Because, as Jesus said (after telling a parable), in as much as you've done this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you've done it unto me. Francis believed that he was meeting Jesus in the people

he served—that there was a mystical encounter with God in the face-to-face encounters with people in need.

Getting back to meeting God in nature for a moment... As we know, Francis had great love for animals, with special fondness for birds. Which is why just about every statue of Francis has a bird on his shoulder, or on his arm, in his hand, or, Francis is holding the bird bath. He liked to refer to animals as his brothers and sisters, and was known to speak directly to the birds. There is even a sermon of Francis' that was preserved, in which he preaches good news to the birds, speaking of their freedom *and* their obligation to be messengers of the grace of God, because of that freedom.

Of course, Francis was known for his preaching about, and efforts toward, peacemaking. He loved and lived the beatitudes: blessed are the poor, the gentle, the peacemakers. His most famous and beloved writing, again, is his peace prayer: make me an instrument (channel) of your peace.

Francis' belief was that peace was achieved through humility. He spoke and taught about humility as much as any of the mystics, and he required his followers to commit to a life of simplicity and humility. Note: statues of Francis (the authentic ones) have his face looking in a downward gaze, reflecting that he was humble, a 'man of the earth.'

Francis took the apostle Paul's imperative to imitate the humility and servanthood of Christ very seriously. He wanted his followers to live and act and speak as servants, doing works of love, in humility, as Jesus did.

As part of this, interestingly, in his instructions to his followers, Francis said, "Show your love to others by *not* wishing that they be better Christians." What he meant by that is, if we wish or tell people to be better Christians, it usually ends up activating the ego, and people try to either become better *than others* (which goes completely against what the apostle Paul is saying in Philippians), or, they try to earn God's approval with their supposed better behavior, in order to please God—and inevitably failing, which can lead to unnecessary guilt. Either way, he said, we lose our peace, and our ability to be true peacemakers, because we become full of ourselves (our pride or our guilt), rather than have the attitude of Christ and his humility. Francis taught to simply go and do, as Jesus did, without thought of self.

So, here's a funny story. This is told by a pastor named Anthony Robinson, who pastored churches in the western Washington area years ago. For a while he lived in a small town that had an award they gave to one person every year titled, "Best Christian in town." No joke. Every year someone was recognized as the best Christian in town.

Robinson says that one year the award for best Christian was given to the town's only Jewish man! Best Christian of the year! Because he ran a successful dry goods store, and he was kind and friendly and an upstanding citizen. That must have been unsettling for him, a Jewish man, to win best Christian of the year.

But this illustrates how many people equate being a "good Christian" with words like "nice" and "friendly" and "good citizen." Which is all well and good, but misses the point. Because it isn't a contest—think of how many people privately want, and try to, win that award—it's not a contest, and neither is it something to try to do to earn approval from God. Mostly, it misses the importance of the internal attitude of humility that comes with faith in Christ, from imitating Christ. And the mystical experience of God in our service.

So, Francis taught, don't show your love by wishing others (or yourself) to be better Christians. Show them love by *servicing* them, in humility, like Christ.

He also wanted his followers to show love and humility and be peacemakers, by not engaging in arguments about doctrine, not trying to correct people, or prove that we're right and they're wrong. Francis lived at the height of the time of the Crusades, those awful and violent attempts of the church-sponsored military to wrest the holy land from Muslims, and force conversions to Christianity.

And in the midst of that horrific chapter in the history of Christianity, we have a brilliant, shining example of Francis being a peacemaker, by not engaging in arguments and power struggles and attempts at proving who is right and wrong, but finding a better way.

The city of Jerusalem, at that time, was under Muslim control, and Francis was horrified by the violence that was being committed against both Christians *and* Muslims. So, in 1219 Francis asked for, and famously gained an audience with the sultan of Egypt—a remarkable feat! The sultan knew of Francis and his influence, and trusted him, and him alone, as someone he could talk with about the battles over the holy land. They met over the course of three days, and to this day no one really knows, specifically, what transpired during their meetings. Francis didn't write about it. However, we do know that Francis and the sultan became friends after that, and continued to meet and correspond.

It is this good impression Francis left with the Muslim leaders that explains why the Franciscan Friars were, 100 years later in 1333, the first—and for a long time the only—religious group authorized by the sultan to return to Jerusalem, and entrusted with watching over certain Christian holy places—a trust they still maintain today! 700 years later. If you go to Israel today, especially the sacred



Christian sites and shrines around Jerusalem, they are still watched over and cared for by Franciscans.

This was Francis the humble peacemaker, who clearly did not go into his meeting with the sultan armed with convincing arguments, defenses, threats, or attempts to correct or convert him. Rather, he went with the attitude of Christ Jesus, a posture of humility and, we can assume, of listening.

Therefore, Francis earned the right to say this, in one of his writings: “A [person] has not yet given up *everything* for God as long as [they] hold on to the moneybag of [their] own opinions.” Some will find that this bag is more cumbersome (and maybe more coveted) than a real money bag. And—truth be told—we seldom let go of it.

A long time ago I lived with a Japanese family for a year and learned of an old Japanese proverb that says, “If you want to discover the truth, drop your opinions.” Or, “Don’t *seek* the truth; drop your opinions and the truth will emerge.” It seems that wisdom has taken root in many cultures around the world.

It doesn’t mean that we don’t have or hold any opinions. Of course we do. It means that we don’t lead with them, wield them as weapons, or let our ego get in the way so much that we feel like we need to be right all the time, or win every argument. Because that seldom leads to peacemaking, and it destroys our inner

peace. As the old saying goes, “Do you want to be right, or do you want to be peaceful?”

Perhaps another way to say this is, drop your *judgments*. Or, drop your *preconceived notions* (about other people, or issues). It’s easier to make peace when we are open and receptive. Or, as Thomas Merton said, when we hold onto judgments and preconceived notions, we are too full to make room for others, and for God in our encounters.

And that is what Paul means when he says in our reading that Jesus emptied himself. It doesn’t mean that he lost his personality, or that he had no strong convictions or nothing to say (of course he did). Rather, it means that he set aside his ego, his pride, his need to be right, and took a posture of servanthood and of making peace. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:14 “He (Jesus) is our peace... and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.”

Do we have dividing walls of hostility that need to be broken down? We could learn from Jesus, and from Francis, about what it takes to be healers and harmonizers in today’s world.

One thing it takes for sure: it takes humility.

We are called to be everyday peacemakers. You don't have to preach to birds, or to people! Not with words at least. As Francis said, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." Simple acts of love and service will do.

To be an everyday peacemaker you don't have to renounce all your earthly goods and possessions, like Francis did. As I mentioned last week, it's about setting our intention, our desire, to meet God in the places and times and people of our everyday lives. Whether we make plans and have routines, or whether experiences come in serendipitous moments out of the blue, it's about openness and awareness.

The song we're about to sing is titled "We wait the peaceful kingdom." But we don't actually have to wait. Because, as Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is already among you. We can experience the peaceful Kingdom, and be peacemakers in that Kingdom, every day.

And especially now as we celebrate God's love for us in Christ through this communion table....