

Feast of St. Francis
October 5, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

A Different Vision:

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Today we celebrate the life of St. Francis of Assisi, perhaps the most beloved and well-known of all the saints—Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists all cherish him. St. Francis—an indomitable spirit whose reach extended across lines of faith and race and class. St. Francis—the kindly man who talked to birds and considered all creation part of his family. I imagine each and every one of us brings the same picture to mind when we hear his name—a robbed figure tenderly holding a little bird in his hands. But there is so much more to Francis of Assisi, so much more he has to give us, so much more he has to teach us.

Today, as we celebrate the life of St. Francis of Assisi, I find myself thinking about his two homes—the home in which he was born and the home in which he died and the path between the two.

Francis was born into wealth and privilege and all that goes along with such wealth and privilege—the kind of security that comes from never being hungry, the luxury of not even seeing those in need, and the freedom to take your time finding your way in the world. He could rise above the turbulence of the times in which he lived—the violence, the fear, and the anxiety that in his day, like ours, marked so many lives. His first home was comfortable indeed.

His last home—the place where Francis died—was a simple chapel not far from the town where he was born, a ruins he rebuilt, a place in the woods dear to his heart. They say that just before he died, Francis had his brothers carry him outside, strip off all his clothes, and place him on the ground. They say he wanted to remember his connection with the poorest of the poor. I imagine he said a prayer and then his brothers brought him in and placed him on a simple bed. There he died surrounded by his brothers singing the Canticle of the Sun which he had written—the Canticle we read this morning. Francis died at home—at home in the heart of God.

What a journey he took!

From indulged son to impoverished monk; from a life of privilege to the privilege of poverty; from a place above the fray to the center of it all; from lover of the courtly life to lover of God and all of God's creation.

Francis—the wealthy knight who, upon seeing a poor knight headed off to war, dismounts, gives that poor knight his armor and his horse and then exchanges clothes with him.

Francis—a child of privilege and the comfort privilege provides, repulsed by lepers and those less beautiful than he, encounters a leper on the road and instead of turning away turns to the leper, takes his hand and puts it to his lips.

—a pilgrim meeting the poor on the streets of Rome and giving them not only his money but also his clothes.

—a mendicant friar living off the work of his hands and the kindness of strangers

—a man who reached out to those others ignored and in doing so found Christ.

Francis—a child of God delighting in all of God’s creation.

No wonder people thronged to him. They sought his healing touch. They came from miles around to hear him preach. Others clamored to be part of his community. Francis once said, “Preach all the time, if necessary use words.” And that’s just what he did. He talked the talk; he walked the walk; he practiced what he preached.

To the outcasts of his day—the lepers and the poor; to people teetering on the brink; and to the well-born and well-connected who found the dogma of their day—the call to courtly love and the love of worldly things—unfulfilling; Francis offers a different vision. He offers that vision to us as well—for we, too, live in a times of teetering on the brink; we, too, find ourselves questioning the dogma of our day—materialism run wild and an excessive individualism that can leave us isolated and alone.

Francis offers a vision of the good life—a life rooted in the goodness of God and in relationship with one another and all creation. A way of living with one another in civility and goodness. A way of connection, a way of compassion, a way of community and communion with Brother Sun and Sister Moon, with Brother Fire and Sister Water, with Mother Earth, with those who forgive for love of God, and with those who endure sickness and trial.

Francis invites us to join him on the path—a path of connection, a path of compassion, a path to life in the community of the kingdom of God. How do we do that? One step at a time. Reaching out to others, meeting their need, delighting in their presence and as we do we will find ourselves at home—at home in the kingdom of God.