

Feast of Francis of Assisi  
Jeremiah 22:13-16  
Psalm 148:7-14  
Galatians 6:14-18  
Matthew 11:25-30

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Rutherfordton, NC  
October 1, 2017

On this beautiful Fall day when we come together to celebrate the feast day of our patron saint, Francis of Assisi, it seems like a good place to begin is with his own petitions. Let us pray.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

It's wonderful to see you all today, and especially to see both sides of our parish family. Churches do like to call themselves family, and St. Francis is no exception. I've been thinking about family as we've prepared for today, particularly in terms of families who don't see each other very often. There was a piece in the Daily Courier last week, a letter actually, written by a new bride who was complaining that some well-off but not well-known relatives had given her a beautiful punch bowl for a wedding gift. Her complaint was about the five dollar garage sale sticker on the bottom of it. She was incensed, but I could only think her relatives had probably wondered why they had been invited in the first place, family or not.

What really caught my attention was the bride's statement that *she* had wanted a small wedding, but her mother intervened by shaking the family tree and sending invitations to anyone who fell out of it. We can only speculate about the mother's motivation and remember that families, like churches, are made up of people near and far, some who are around all the time, and some who only come on special occasions, some we like and some we don't. Yet distance and absence and popularity don't remove folks from our family—we're just not always close. You may be looking around today and seeing faces that are both familiar and unknown. That's one of the reasons we have these little get-togethers—so you can become acquainted or reacquainted, much like you would at a reunion of distant cousins. You were all invited, and your invitation had nothing to do with which part of the family tree you came from!

Several years ago one of our members, who I hope will forgive me for sharing this story without permission, was invited to join a local board. At the first meeting the members of the group were getting to know each other, using that form we Southerners practice so well: the inquisition. Where do you live? Who are your people? Do you have any children? Where do you go to church? In response to the answer, "St. Francis," the other said, "So do I. I've never seen *you* there before." Uh oh! Let's fix that today! Don't ask anyone here you haven't already met where they go to church!

I'm talking about family, not only because that's what we call ourselves, but because we share the legacy of people whose imprint is on our parish. The first, of course, is Francis of Assisi. You'll remember that he walked away from the legacy of wealth and status enjoyed by his blood family. His father, a merchant, must have been hurt and disappointed when Francis chose a different way, just as we would be in that situation. Among the many stories and sayings about Francis, is the account of how Francis and his father ultimately became permanently estranged. While searching for his own life in Christ, Francis went one day to the church at San Damiano, and while he was praying, he heard Christ say to him, "Francis, repair my church." The building of the church where he prayed was crumbling, and Francis believed Christ was calling him to fix it. He had no financial resources, so he took fabric from his father's shop and sold it to get the money he needed to make the repairs. His father saw it as an act of theft and dragged Francis to the bishop, where in front of the whole town, he demanded that Francis return the money and renounce his inheritance.

The Bishop kindly told Francis that God would provide what was needed. Francis returned the money, then stripped off all his clothes until he was wearing only a hair shirt. He renounced his father and said, "From now on I can say with complete freedom, "Our Father who art in heaven..." Afterward, Francis devoted his life to God, and in establishing his monastic order said that he was going to do what no one thought possible anymore, that is, to live by the Gospel. Of course, *that* is his legacy to us who worship in this church bearing his name—to live the Gospel, first as individuals and then together in community. His prayer makes his legacy to us very clear.

We also have another legacy to follow here at St. Francis, and that is the legacy of those who have worshiped and served God as members of this church since it was formed in the mid-1800s. We have a rich history of faithfulness, service, and generosity that goes all the way back to those first days when members of the Coxe family and others established the Episcopal Church in Rutherford County. Thankfully we have evidence of our history, including a vestry action from the late nineteen-sixties. If it sounds familiar, that's because today is the third time I've shared this with you in my St. Francis Day sermon.

In 1969, each church in our diocese was asked to formulate a statement of purpose and goals and submit them to the Bishop. A "committee of ten" drafted the following purpose statement for St. Francis Church: "Recognizing Jesus Christ as our Lord and example and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this parish seeks to strengthen each individual's relationship with God and his fellow man. It further seeks to be a center of worship, solace and fellowship as well as a sanctuary in the world from which love, joy, peace, thanksgiving, and the reconciliation of Christ emanates into our community."

The paper named goals that included an emphasis on youth, Christian Education, reorganizing the Episcopal Church Women, creating an adult discussion group, and increasing membership by five percent. The rector was charged with making a list of services and activities necessary to carry on the work of the church and then to present that list to the parish so that each person would be able to name at least three areas to become involved in, thereby developing their own Christian vocation. The statement closed with six questions that seem just as pertinent today as they did in 1969:

1. What has Christ called us to do?
2. What have we promised to do in our baptismal and confirmation vows?
3. What are the needs of the community?
4. What can we, as the Body of Christ, do about community needs, and what has the greatest priority?
5. How can we best utilize our resources?
6. What is the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Our world, our community, and our church are very different now than when those six questions were first asked, but the questions are no less relevant than they were then. In fact, they may be even *more* relevant. To hear the answers, each of us must be willing to follow Francis's example of prayer and humble service to God and to others in God's name. We must also be willing to put aside our differences, to sacrifice our time and energy, and to work together to make our church and our community a place of peace and love, a place that is the path to our Lord Jesus Christ, who said, "Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. *Amen.*