

St Paul's, Concord  
October 6 and 7, 2018  
St. Francis of Assisi: Matthew 11:25-30  
Rev. Kate Atkinson

This weekend we're celebrating the feast of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Saint, Francis of Assisi – and we're also in week three of our "Way of Love" sermon and discussion series. The first two steps of this series were Turn and Learn, and the third step is Pray.

Francis is famous for saying, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." (Bookmarks printed with this quote were given out at the weekend services. If you would like to have one, [send an email](#) to the parish office.) There's some doubt over whether this is an actual quote from St. Francis – but it doesn't really matter because he certainly lived by that principle. And preaching the gospel through actions rather than words, is a wonderful illustration of how prayer can enrich the life of a prayerful person.

There are plenty of writings of St. Francis that we know *are* authentic, and one of those is a paraphrase he composed on the Lord's Prayer. Translated in 1905 by Father Pascal Robinson, of the Quaracchi editors, this work is a fascinating glimpse into the spirituality of St. Francis – who was so much more than a Dr. Doolittle of the Middle Ages!

Here's how Francis expounded on the line, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*: "That we may love Thee with the whole heart by always thinking of Thee; with the whole soul by always desiring Thee; with the whole mind by directing all our intentions to Thee and seeking Thy honor in all things and with all our strength, by spending all the powers and senses of body and soul in the service of Thy love and not in anything else; and that we may love our neighbors even as ourselves, drawing to the best of our power all to Thy love; rejoicing in the good of others as in our own and compassionating them in troubles and giving offence to no one.

In other words, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." We associate Francis with animals and nature – but there's something else that was even more important to him. Francis was all about loving God and sharing God's love with other people. That could only be accomplished in the context of a rich prayer life.

In his younger years, Francis had a powerful experience of Christ calling him to a different way of living – a way that didn't depend on the material trappings he'd grown used to in his father's home. So Francis completely renounced that lifestyle, even – as the story goes – to the extent of removing his fancy clothes and standing naked in the street.

Francis came to the discovery that he didn't want anything to stand in the way of his relationship with Christ: not wealth, not privilege, not any of the distractions that came with living in luxury, including, it has to be said, a fair amount of debauchery! In ridding himself of those encumbrances, Francis was able to see God more clearly, to hear God's voice and to respond from the depths of his soul. And that is prayer.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

Those words from Matthew’s gospel describe the process Francis went through, as he shed the burdens of excess and deepened his connection with Christ. And they are words that speak to *our* hearts too. We all want that rest for our souls that Jesus speaks of; we all want to shed the heavy burdens that come with living in a challenging world. And, as people of faith, we all want to grow closer to the one who can restore and revive us. Prayer helps us to achieve all these things.

The Episcopal Church is known as a liturgical Church – which means, among other things, that we have beautifully written prayers to guide us through our worship services and to bring us comfort, guidance, and strength in other areas of our lives. Do you need protection when you’re traveling, or comfort before surgery, or help raising a child? There’s a prayer for that! Our Book of Common Prayer is full of so much more than the pages we turn to for our weekly service of Holy Eucharist. Prayers for Rain, for Sound Government, for Strength and Confidence, for Those Who Live Alone – and many, many more.

But prayer doesn’t always mean reading or reciting beautifully crafted lines like these. There are other ways of speaking to God and, even more important, of inviting God to speak to us. The point of regular prayer is that it’s an intentional choice to spend time with the one who loves us beyond imagining, who is always ready to hear what we have to say, and who answers us in ways that we may fail to notice when we don’t take time to listen.

As Francis roamed around the countryside, the beauty, the power and the bounty of creation sustained him. Francis learned to respect the intricacies of God’s great design, *and* he learned to rely entirely on God’s provision. From what we know about St. Francis’ character, even during times of suffering his faith never diminished. And, as he travelled, he praised God for everything he encountered: the glory of the sun, the moon and the stars; the elements and the weather – even nasty weather; everything that grew from the earth or walked upon it, or swam or crawled or flew. And he encouraged all creatures to give thanks and to praise God.

I know that many people experience their encounters with nature as a form of prayer. We can be so overcome by the sight of a gorgeous sunset, or a leaping deer, or a roaring river, that all we can do is bubble over with thanksgiving and praise. It happens with our own animals as well – an overwhelming sense of gratitude that God has blessed us with these loyal, affectionate companions. And as we bring them before God for prayers of blessing, we’ll be following Francis’ example of appreciation and gratitude for the natural world, and his love and concern for all living things.

But there’s even more that we can learn from Francis. Throughout his ministry, whenever Francis encountered people who were poor and needy, he found ways to feed and clothe them – despite his own poverty. He also encountered people who were hungry for *other* things they couldn’t provide for themselves, no matter how materially rich they may have been. And Francis fed them too. He fed them with God’s word, he nourished them with God’s love, and he offered a lasting alternative to the lifestyle that their world valued so much.

That passage from our gospel reading isn't only about finding rest for our souls. It isn't only about laying down heavy burdens and being refreshed. Jesus also spoke about picking something up. He said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me..." Taking another lesson from the animal kingdom, imagine a pair of oxen yoked together. There are two sides to a yoke, two collars. It's never intended to be worn by just one animal – it would drag on the ground and weigh the animal down. Jesus tells us that *his* yoke is easy, that *his* burden is light."

What Jesus means is that if we are willing to shoulder our side of the yoke, if we choose to live our life, and to love and care for one another, the way he taught us, Jesus will always be there beside us, supporting the other side of the yoke, helping us along. Francis knew that if he yoked himself to Jesus, Jesus would be with him every day of his life. We can be sure of that too. And we accomplish this through prayer.

If you've brought an animal to church for a blessing, or if you're remembering a pet who was dear to you, then you know all about caring for someone who, in turn, relies on *you* for survival. Jesus cares for *us* like that. Jesus wants us to rely on *him* too, for everything we need to survive – physically and spiritually – and to come to him openly and honestly with all that we carry on our heart. And Jesus wants us to be able to draw on what we receive from him in order to enrich the lives of other people – to preach the gospel at all times, using words only if necessary.

As we remember Francis; as we pray for God's blessing on the animals that are dear to us; as we acknowledge our longing for life and freedom, for peace and harmony and rest, let's re-discover the gift of an easy yoke and a burden that we barely notice because we never carry it alone.