

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Geoffrey S. Royce, Deacon
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22, Year A
October 8, 2023**

Most High all powerful, all good Lord, All praise is yours, all honor and all blessings.

Most people, when they think of religion, think of it as something like a constant that exists on its own. That it is part of a continuous self-sustaining and somehow separate and self-referential system of influence. That it can be reduced to a form of governance contained in rules, doctrines or liturgies or prayer books. Or that it is primarily a particular slice of history.

And while none of these notions is entirely false or even misleading none of them actually capture what religion is and what being religious actually involves because these ideas don't include our participation. "Life becomes religious whenever we make it so; when some new light is seen, when some deeper appreciation is felt, when some larger outlook is gained, when some nobler (more generous) purpose is formed, when some task is well done."ⁱ

Religion and the entire history of religion exists in the enfleshed faith of those whom God has claimed as God's own. This process becomes recognizable in the human response to an initiative that begins in God often long before we know anything about it. This is a liminal and therefore unstable process. And it may at times feel like or seem to be a little crazy or at least off beat.

In just a short while members and friends of Calvary will gather with their pets to celebrate a practice that goes back many centuries. We will bless our animals and God's creation. Animals were present at the birth of Christ. We can say that in that they were blessed. But the blessing of animals was brought to world-wide importance through the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. In doing this we keep and honor the memory of Saint Francis. He is probably the most popular and admired of all the saints while also being the least imitated. One of our interesting paradoxes. But this is sainthood, this encounter with the paradoxical, the liminal, the unstable. Make no mistake. We are all called to sainthood; to do and be, for the glory of God what God created us to do and be, nothing more and nothing less.

The sheer number of stories or legends that have surrounded the life of Saint Francis is evidence enough of how much God loved him. His life is marked by discoveries that he was in the wrong place, not being the one he was created to be. He was born to a wealthy merchant family. Like many of the saints he was living the life of the bon vivant without much purpose or direction. This seems to have been a requirement for many saints. They really prove that left to themselves, they were of little real use.

He attended a school of Troubadours and participated in the life of a school of poets who practiced what they called the Gay Science. In this time, courtly romance was conducted through the overtures of a team of troubadours who acted on behalf of the heart-struck male admirer. They would sing of the brokenhearted one to the object of his affection. Then a second troubadour would provide comic relief with tumbling and juggling basically the gestures of a clown to lighten the moment. Eventually Francis would refer to his followers as Jongleur de Dieu, God's clowns.

The story is told that his father entrusted to him the sale of fine cloth. In this task he was not very careful and didn't collect the money for the sales accurately. At some point in this process, he was approached by a beggar, and he dismisses the beggar who runs off. In that moment, something happens to Francis, and he goes after the beggar and gives him the remainder of the day's profits, leaving his wares unprotected in the marketplace. This of course earns Francis his father's wrath and eventually he finds himself excised from the family, inheritance and all.

Like many of the founders of religious orders Francis was a soldier. He was captured by his enemy in battle and imprisoned. Upon being released and returning to his life in the world he no longer saw the world the same way. To Francis it seemed that "God had hung the world as if on nothing" (Job 26:7). He hears a loud voice that says "My church is in ruins. Rebuild my church. And so, he begins his work in the church on the actual fabric of the building. In this time, he is finding himself exposed to the marginalized in his community, the poor, the lepers. God is assembling in his soul the object of love he would keep for life in his troubadour's poetry, Lady Poverty, his lady. He exchanged his fine clothes for the garment of a beggar and began his life of itinerant preaching. Francis preached to the birds. He converted a wolf from terrorizing a particular town's people promising the wolf that the people would feed him. Eventually he came to see all of the Creation as his brother and sister.

Was he crazy or just really devoted? Or is it we who cannot bear his love of poverty. There might be some ways we could embrace poverty if we looked at our situation a little differently. As of today, the total weight of the CO2 collected currently in our atmosphere, cumulative since the industrial revolution, is greater than the total weight of all living matter on earth; all the plants, all the animals, all the living matter. Maybe there is a part of our carbon footprint, that in moving towards an embrace of poverty, we can give up and join ourselves to the man who among many other titles can legitimately be called a founder of the environmental movement.

ⁱ Sophia Lyon Fahs