

The Way of Poverty

When I graduated from Berkley High School in 1977, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. No one in my family had ever gone to college, so that wasn't really encouraged. I had volunteered at Storer Camps during the winter for a week, and so I looked into working there full time.

I was hired and so in the fall I moved into Napoleon, Michigan at Storer camps to begin my work as an outdoor educator. I had no idea what I was doing and they didn't seem to care. I was to teach different classes of students that came for a week during the school year. Storer Camps basic philosophy was to put us in charge of something and then we figure out how to do the thing we were asked to be in charge of. For example, I was to teach Horse Back Riding when I had never ridden a horse in my life. So I got a crash course on how to clean the horse's shoes, how to put the saddle on tight and how to insert the rein into the horse's mouth. I got really good at that, and I learned to love horses to this very day.

Another class I was asked to teach was orienteering. Now, if you are like me, you don't know what orienteering is, right? I am sure that you have figured out that it has something to do with a compass, right? Ok so orienteering is using a map, which if you know anything about me, you know that I can't read a map, and orienteering is also using a compass. The first thing you need to do is find north on your compass. The needle always points to the north. It is a magnetic force that pulls the needle always to the north.

Lay the map down horizontally, and then place the compass flat on the map. And then you rotate the map until the north lines on the map are aligned with the compass needle which is pointing north. Then the map is oriented to the terrain. In theory, this makes it much easier to read.

But in our orienteering class that I taught, we didn't use a map. We just gave each group a compass and a piece of paper that told them how many steps to take until we told them to go south, or go east and they needed to work together to figure out how to find east when the needle is pointing north, etc. until they found the goal of their orienteering map which was usually the dining hall.

Orienteering is fun if you know what you're doing but it can be really frustrating if you A) can't read a map, or B) can't read a compass. I hated teaching this class because kids got frustrated. But I also liked watching them get their "aha" moments and found joy in watching them get to their goal. The one thing that frustrated them the most, was trying to move the needle from north. You can't control where the compass points. It always points north. It's a constant.

As we make our way on our journey of making our way, looking for the true north, we come upon another Saint leading us on this path of stewardship.

Today we are talking about St. Francis of Assisi? For those of us who don't come from a Catholic background, he's mostly known for his focus on peace making, his love of animals, the environment, and all of creation in general. He was probably the world's first environmentalist. He lived in the 1200's and back then he was vocal about protecting the environment.

The lyrics to our opening hymn, “All Creatures of Our God and King,” were written by St. Francis and they reflect his belief that nature itself is the mirror of God. In that hymn we address “brother sun,” “sister moon,” “brother wind,” “sister water” and yes, “mother earth.” We could probably safely say that St. Francis was a card carrying “tree hugger.”

As an official saint of the church, his feast day is observed on October 4. On the first Sunday of October, a lot of churches has a blessing of the animals as part of their worship celebrations. A lot of kids bring their pets to be blessed by the pastor. In one church I worked at, a church member brought his horse to church that day. Interestingly, St. Francis is credited with arranging the very first Christmas live nativity with real animals.

Something else St. Francis is known for is his commitment to economic poverty. He and the members of the Order of St. Francis cherished poverty. It was so central to his character that in his last written work he said that absolute personal and corporate poverty was the essential lifestyle for members of his order.

What most of us don't realize is that it wasn't always this way for St. Francis. It was something he grew into as an adult. He was born into a very wealthy family. His father was a prosperous silk merchant and his mother was a noble woman. It's said that he was handsome, witty, delighted in fine clothes, surrounded himself with rich friends and was a love of material pleasures. IN his early years, Francis lived as carefree a life as he could.

However, at his baptism, God marked Francis, and had a plan for him. Slowly but surely, Francis began to sour on his carefree, pleasure filled life. Material possessions came to mean less to him than following God's will. In one instance, on a pilgrimage to Rome, he joined the poor in begging at St. Peter's Basilica, which had fallen into ruin. After experiencing a vision in which he sensed God telling him to help repair the building, he sold a great deal of expensive cloth from his father's store to assist the priests in their effort. Francis was being pulled by the compass, but it wasn't a magnetic force but a spiritual force.

The problem was, his father viewed what Francis did as theft; the cloth didn't properly belong to Francis. This was the first of many conflicts with his father that ended with Francis renouncing his father and his property. From this point on, his life is on a trajectory towards poverty, peace and a life of total surrender to God.

It's this last thing – a life of total surrender to God, that's the chief characteristic of St. Francis. After realizing that all the money and pleasure the world has to offer only left him feeling empty, he came to the conclusion that the only pathway to true meaning is living in complete and utter trust in God.

This is what we might call the Way of Poverty. For St. Francis, it denoted economic poverty and spiritual poverty. And by spiritual poverty, I mean what Matthew calls being “poor in Spirit.” Or more commonly known as humility, trust in God.

It's to recognize our utter spiritual bankruptcy before God. Being poor in spirit is admitting that I am destitute spiritually before God and can do nothing to deliver myself from my situation. It's

to recognize and accept the fact that Jesus can make me spiritually whole and right in God's eyes.

For us today, The Way of Poverty may not require us to sell everything we have and give to the poor, but it does and always will, require us to surrender ourselves to God.

The question is, "what in your own life still remains unsundered to God? What area of your own life are you still holding on to the control of, that is keeping you from experiencing the fullness of joy and life that God has given you? I know what it is for me; I know what I'm resisting surrendering. What is it for you?"

For St. Francis, it was his wealth that got in the way of his relationship with God. And for the young man who approached Jesus in today's story in Mark's gospel, it was his possessions. For him, following the rulers wasn't the issue. Don't commit murder – check. Don't commit adultery – check. Don't steal – check. Don't bear false witness – check. Don't cheat – check. Honor your Father and mother – check. Check, check, check. Rule keeping he was good at.

But there was one area of his life that remained unsundered. "You lack one thing," Jesus pointed out. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then and only then will you have treasure in heaven."

Mark tells the reader that when Jesus revealed this one unsundered area of his life, he walked away discouraged and sad. Why? Because like a skilled surgeon with a laser knife, Jesus honed in on and pinpointed the one area of his life that would be the most difficult to surrender control of.

Why does it have to be that? he must have wondered. Why can't it be something that's easy for me to give up control? Isn't it good enough that I keep all the rules? I go to the Temple every week. I say grace before every meal – even in public. I read my Bible and pray every day. I serve on the Finance committee at the Synagogue. I give alms to the poor. I don't hang out in the bar, and mostly associate with respectable people. With all that I do right, why does this Jesus guy, now require that I let go of my stuff? Doesn't he know how long it's take me to get it all.. and that it's stuff that's important to me! And besides all that, how come he didn't come down on that guy over there? He's got way more stuff than me!

Now, to be fair, contrary to how this rich young man is usually portrayed by modern commentators, we don't know how he responded to Jesus beyond his initial dismay. Even though Mark doesn't tell us any more about him, I'd like to think that after struggling with what Jesus said, he, like St. Francis, eventually saw the truth, and followed through, selling his stuff, giving the money to the poor, and became a follower. We'll never know, but it's certainly possible.

So, back to us. What is it that binds you and keeps you less free to follow God? My guess is that it's probably the one thing you just can't imagine surrendering control of, either because it's too important to you, or it's simply too difficult a challenge.

I will tell you what I think is the #1 thing that impedes our freedom to fully follow God. It's our resistance to the foundational principle of Christian Stewardship which is this: Every single thing I have belongs to God. Everything that I could call my own, all that I own, is, in truth, not mine but God's

God owns it all. Not me, God. God's entrusted to me everything that's at my disposal – my family, my home, my job, my time, my friends, my skills, my interests, my thoughts, my struggles, my money, my dreams, my possessions, my debt and yes, my money, including my pension.

The thing is, God didn't give it to me to use as I personally desire or see fit, but to manage it; to manage and take care of it in accordance with God's directives. Where that spiritual force on my compass is leading me. That is foundational to Christian Stewardship.

With this in mind, just as St. Francis realized that the cloth he sold wasn't his to sell, he asks us, "Is your money yours to give? If the answer is no, then his follow up question is, "Could it be considered theft when you use your money first for your own pleasure and purposes and then give to God from what's left over?"

It's not hard to intellectually agree with the concept that Jesus is in charge of my life, that God owns it all. Where it becomes a challenge is translating belief into behavior. If God owns it all, and God's Word tells us to give to God "off the top" of what we make and not from what's left over at the end of the month, why is it such a challenge for most of us to actually do that?

For example, why is it that when we're creating our personal budgets we tend to put "Ministry and God's Work" near the bottom of the expense column rather than at the top? What keeps us from putting it at the top of the column, inserting an amount that's 1 or 2% greater than what we gave last year, then figuring out a way to cover the rest of the expenses from what's left over after that?

Even if we believe it's the right thing to do because it's God's in the first place, what keeps us from doing that? Probably the same thing that made the rich young man walk away discouraged – the belief that it's just too challenging if not altogether impossible.

Total surrender to God – the Way of Poverty – is never easy. Following after Jesus entails taking up my cross? In Mark 8:34 Jesus told the crowd, "If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up your cross and follow in my footsteps."

To say no to oneself is to resist thinking "I can't" because it seems to me I can't. To say no to oneself is to say yes to God, to say yes to doing things God's way – not because they make sense and align with my way of thinking, but because they are God's ways and God's ways are better than my way.

Following Jesus is always hard, but keep in mind that easy is not the goal in life. St. Francis came to this conclusion. Following Jesus may not be easy, but there is a payoff. Jesus said that "anyone who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or property because

of me, will receive one hundred times as much now in this life – as well as persecution. And in the coming age, they will have eternal life.”

Maybe the charge for each of us this week is to do two things. First identify for ourselves what aspect of our life we would rather not surrender to God...or don't think we have the ability to surrender to God. And whatever that may be, to then take the first steps towards surrendering it, actually saying the words, “Jesus, since you own it in the first place, I surrender his part of my life over to you.”

Second consider how we might orient our compass to the belief that God's the owner of all we have with a lifestyle that reflects that belief. Lay it before God in prayer this week. Specifically, ask God to lay on your heart a specific percentage of your income that God wants you to return.

I'm not telling you what that should be, or whether it should be greater or lesser than what you're giving this year. But I would encourage you to seek God's counsel in this matter.

And then, after you've discerned answers to both issues, commit yourself to trusting God to provide what is needed. Begin every day with the proclamation, “I surrender all.” Amen.