



Francis of Assisi: The Way of Poverty

Mark 10:17-31

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Growing up in the church, I attended a rather large Methodist Church outside of Atlanta. Our youth meetings on Sunday evenings had between 50 and 90 youth while I was still there. The church operated with a programmatic focus for youth, offering games, retreats, concerts, dedicated worship services, mission trips, and youth choir, all in an attempt to just get our middle and high school students to show up. We had a lot of fun, and I made some great friends who I remain in contact with today.

Yet, when I think back on the impact of the youth program on my life, it wasn't the lock-ins, the games, or the trips that stand out. It wasn't the Bible studies or separated youth worship opportunities. Sure, I have memories from some of these things, but they aren't what made the biggest impact on my life. What influenced my life the most was the presence of the adults who served as youth counselors, and the dedicated support the youth were offered by the elder members of the church.

For example, I remember Mr. Bill Blonshine. Bill had three daughters about the same age as me. He played the guitar in worship on Sunday mornings, and he taught our youth praise team to lead worship for the youth on Sunday evenings. ... I remember Mr. Randy Walters. Randy's daughters were a few years older than I. He used to go on our spring break retreats as the cook. The man was a kitchen master, and he always found ways to incorporate the youth into the work of preparing and cleaning up from the meals. I ended up working in an HVAC warehouse with him for two summers during college, which was solely due to the relationship we had developed. ... I remember Mrs. Lisa Johnson – or Cool Mama J as we referred to her. She taught our Disciple Bible class. Honestly, I can't tell you that I remember much that we talked about in the class – save for the Southern tradition of putting salted peanuts in a glass bottle of Coca-Cola. (It just isn't as good in plastic bottles or an aluminum can, it has to be glass.) It was Lisa's impact on my life led me to say yes to going into ministry. ... And there was the Joy Class. The Joy Class was the seniors class, but I'm not sure anyone in the class was under 75. They would come out to Campmeeting each Summer and make lunches for the entire youth group, some 70+ sandwiches, that we would take with us on a day trip to the water park. There was something special about knowing the Joy Class cared enough about the youth to spend a hot and humid summer night at the buggy campgrounds preparing our meal for the following day. ... There were others too - Stew and Drew, Bert and Pam, Ms. Sandra and more ... when I think back to what taught me faithfulness as a youth, it wasn't the Biblical stories I was taught, it was the example set for me by the adults who surrounded me in the church.

We have a lot we can learn from those who have come before us. I think that is the greatest power of the Biblical text – it gives us examples from which we learn faithfulness. It's not just a rule book for the faithful – it's a historical narrative of the faithful who lived before us. That is

why our current series is focusing on what we can learn from the saints who have come before us. We are learning stewardship from the saints.

While often limited in focus to financial giving, *stewardship* should not be so narrowly defined. As disciples, we are taught in the Biblical text that everything is God's, for it is God who created it all. Thus, as stewards, everything we have – from time, to talent, to treasure – should be understood as something that has been entrusted into our care. Yet, unlike a banker, we aren't caring for the gifts we've been given by God so we can simply turn it back over to God. We have been entrusted with our gifts so that they may be utilized in the work of God. We aren't just storing up gifts, we are putting to use the gifts we've been given so that God's love may be made manifest in the world.

In our attempt to learn from the saints what faithful stewardship looks like, we are finding that stewardship takes on different forms. We learned two weeks ago from Sarah Crosby – one of the first female preachers in the Methodist movement – that stewardship is about the *way of necessity*. At times, we aren't asked to plan or think about how to respond, we're just asked to respond to a need that has presented itself. ... Last Sunday, we learned from St. Luke that stewardship is about generosity – it's about sharing what the world would call *yours* with others because you cannot conceive of behaving any other way.

Today, we are learning from St. Francis of Assisi that stewardship is about *The Way of Poverty*.

Generally, when St. Francis is named, people think of two things: first, there's the animals. You never see St. Francis in a painting without animals around him. And, secondly, people think of monks, which make sense because St. Francis is the founder of the Franciscan Order. Also, again in paintings, he's always wearing his identifiable brown habit – or robe.

Francis was born in France in the 12th Century into a wealthy family. His father was a cloth merchant, and Francis enjoyed the luxuries of growing up among other wealthy teens. He was known to be a leader among the crowd of young people who engaged in lavish and wild parties. Following in his father's footsteps, he became a good business man himself. But being wealthy was not enough – Francis wanted glory. So, he went into battle when his local town, Assisi, declared war on a neighboring town, Perugia. Most of the troops from Assisi were killed, save the wealthy who could be used by Perugia as ransom. Francis found himself chained in a dungeon, held as collateral until he was bought back.

Upon returning home, nothing seemed to have changed in his life. He continued his partying and seeking glory. It came time for battle again, and he set himself up with the finest gear for battle, including a gold decorated suit of armor. On his way to battle, riding upon his steed, Francis heard the voice of God, who called him to return home. A bit of a shock to him, but he listened.

After returning home, Francis kept working with the family business, but was no longer living the extravagant life. Instead, in his free time, he went to pray. One day he found himself

praying in a church at San Damiano where he again heard the voice of God saying, “Francis, fix my church.” He thought God meant the local church there, which had crumbling walls. So, he took some fabric from his father’s shop, and sold it to get the money to repair the church. His father was furious and called him a thief. He took Francis before the local bishop and before the town, and insisted he return the money he had taken, and that he renounce his rights as heir to his father’s fortune. The bishop told Francis to return the money, and said, “God will provide.”

Those words by the bishop led Francis to not only return the money, but he stripped down to his underwear, and give all his clothes back to his father. He saw the clothes as another connection to his father’s wealth, as it was his father’s money that had purchased the clothing. In that public square, he renounced his father, and went off into the woods wearing just rags.

After the day he left his father, Francis lived the remainder of his life in poverty. He begged for people’s garbage just so he’d have food to eat. He lived in the wilderness, finding any space he could to sleep at night. To his surprise, people started coming to him, wanting to join him in this new lifestyle. The remainder of his life, Francis found himself travelling and preaching, naming this life of poverty as a life worth living. “[He] did not try to abolish poverty, he tried to make it holy.”ⁱ For St. Francis, stewardship is about the *the way of poverty*.

In his teaching, St. Francis used this text from Mark 10 as a Biblical foundation for the life of poverty.

The story of the rich young ruler is found in each of the three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is often used in sermons of stewardship to highlight a lifestyle of generosity. It seems to fit into the theme of Zacchaeus, which we read last week, where in Jesus praises the one who has wealth for giving generously to those in need in the surrounding community. But St. Francis didn’t see this text as one that called for generosity, he saw it as a call to poverty.

In the story, this man comes to Jesus to inquire about inheriting eternal life. His question seems to be asked in earnestness. At Jesus’ first reply, saying he must keep the commandments, the man says he has done all these things. He is, by legal standards, a faithful Jewish man. But Jesus follows it up with this additional requirement, saying, “You lack one thing; go, sell your what you have, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

At this, the man was shocked and he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

If this were a simple story about generosity, Jesus might have asked him to give 50%, like Zacchaeus claimed to give to the poor. Or, Jesus might have named that a simple 10% tithe was sufficient for faithfulness. But in this story, Jesus doesn’t limit his call to the man to give a small or larger percentage as a gift. He says to the man, “you lack one thing.”

What he lacks is the trust that in God, he has enough.

Jesus says, “Go, sell what you have, give the money to the poor, so *that* you will have treasure in heaven.”

The man was operating under a faulty traditional Jewish mentality regarding wealth, one that still plagues people of faith throughout the Judeo-Christian world today. “Traditional Jewish piety would usually have said that wealth was a blessing from God, a sign of divine favor. If you obey all the commandments, Moses tells the people of Israel in his final address to them, ‘the Lord will make you abound in prosperity.’”ⁱⁱ

One may argue, if using the Old Testament texts alone, that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing, and poverty of God’s disfavor. But if the Biblical text is taken in its entirety, and we incorporate the teachings of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament, one quickly finds that wealth is not praised as sign of faithfulness. The wealthy in the *Gospel* stories are those accused of being sympathizers of the empire, like the tax collectors. The wealthy are told, like the young man, to sell what they have and to give the proceeds to the poor. Jesus takes great issue with those of great wealth, even saying to his disciples in defense of his response to this wealthy man, that wealth is a great stumbling block for those who wish to be faithful to God and to enter the kingdom of God.

John Wesley echoed these sentiments in his writings in the 18th Century. “[Wesley] wrote that it is hard for the rich to be good Christians, since it becomes too easy for them to trust in their wealth and not think they need to trust in God, too easy to love the world when surrounded by all its allure, and too hard to escape pride in a society that so values wealth.”ⁱⁱⁱ To validate his point, just look back this past week. We saw, for only the second time in lottery history, the Mega Millions jackpot climb to over \$1.5 Billion Dollars. At just the possibility of taking home nearly a billion dollars, between Saturday and Tuesday, nearly \$20 million dollars worth of tickets were sold. \$20 million dollars was spent over a three period on a .0000003% chance of winning. By the end of the year, it’s expected that in 2018, over \$80 billion dollars will have been spent on lottery tickets. To compare that, the United Nations estimates that it would only cost \$30 billion dollars to alleviate hunger throughout the world each year. In our nation – just in America - we spend nearly three times as much money each year trying to miraculously win more money than it would take to feed every hungry person across the face of the globe for an entire year.

Jesus engages with this wealthy man, and instead of condemning him of his ‘sin’, he invites the man to turn from his captivity to his possessions, those things that were keeping him from living fully into God’s will. The man leaves grieving, because he had many possessions.

St. Francis on the other hand, confronted with the opportunity to leave the material world behind, not only gave back the money, he took off and gave away even the clothes on his back. “Francis said that this kind of voluntary poverty was freedom – freedom from owing anyone other than God, and so freedom to serve God.”^{iv} Poverty for Francis wasn’t about having nothing, it was about having the freedom to pursue the one thing that he came to know as worth pursuing – life centered in God’s will. Francis didn’t leave wealth because money wasn’t

beneficial for helping those who had need. Francis didn't turn to poverty because he felt it was the only way to be a faithful steward of the resources he had at his disposal. Francis didn't go into the wilderness and live in the woods because he thought it was the only way one could be faithful to Christ's call for disciples to follow him. Francis went the way of poverty because for him, he saw wealth as a restrictive power that kept him from being faithful to God's will. He saw wealth as a competing entity. He saw giving up money as a victory over the power of money that oppresses us.

In the shadow of the nation's capital where so many people are bought and paid to speak and act for interest groups, it shouldn't be hard for us to see the strength of the power of money. When we can't move forward as a nation on even simple changes that protect our children, or our veterans, or those with mental illnesses, or those living in poverty, or the elderly, or our houses of worship because interest groups are investing billions of dollars into politicians to ensure their stock and salaries rise, perhaps St. Francis' witness is one we should revisit. For Francis, *the way of poverty* wasn't about living with nothing, it was about having no allegiance save to the will of God. It wasn't about being poor; it was about being rich in the one thing that mattered: the great love of God in Jesus Christ. As we learn stewardship from the saints, perhaps we should redefine the way of poverty as a faithful step toward giving up on the powers of wealth so that we might be more focused and willing to follow the will and call of God. For the glory of God, may we learn from the saints, who teach us faithful living. Amen.

ⁱ *St. Francis of Assisi*. catholic.org. Retrieved October 24, 2018.

ⁱⁱ William C. Placher. *Mark: Belief, a Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Placher.

^{iv} Sarah McGiverin. umcdiscipleship.org. Retrieved October 24, 2018.