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St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle, WA  
Sunday, October 2, 2011  
Proper 22, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary / Francis of Assisi, Friar

Isaiah 5:1-7  
Psalm 80:7-14  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
Matthew 11:25-30

What was your most prized possession when you were twelve years old?

I suspect your answer to that question may have a lot to do with what decade you were born in. Maybe it was a beloved toy, or book, or piece of clothing; maybe, if you were born after the 1970's or so, it was a piece of electronic gadgetry. Whatever it was ... what would it have taken for you to decide to give it up?

In contemplating the readings for the feast of St. Francis this week, I found myself remembering one of my earliest spiritual crises on the subject of worldly possessions. I was eleven or twelve years old. Through church, Sunday school, or something I'd read, I had been confronted by one of the hard sayings of Jesus in the gospels—maybe it was the story of the rich young man Jesus tells to sell his possessions and give them to the poor, or maybe it was the instruction to the disciples to carry their crosses and give up all their possessions. At any rate, I was still reflecting on the idea when I walked into the living room and my eye lighted on my Super Nintendo Entertainment System. This piece of 16-bit hardware, now outdated by at least three generations of technical progress, was at that time the coveted pinnacle of video gamery, and my most highly prized and most expensive possession, filling my adolescent years with characters like Zelda, Mario, and Donkey Kong. Standing there, looking at my beloved Super NES, the clarion call of the gospel still ringing through my brain, I came to a critical realization. There was no way I could give up my Super Nintendo. I felt guilty about this fact, realizing not everyone had a Super Nintendo and Jesus would undoubtedly like me to sell mine to help feed the starving children of the Third World. But there it was.

Francis was a little older when he had his spiritual crisis—but not much. The privileged son of a wealthy cloth merchant around the year 1200, as a young adult he felt increasingly called to serve Jesus in more tangible ways, including caring physically for the lepers who were the sickest and most powerless people in his society. His sense of vocation came to a head when, praying in the ruined church of San Damiano, Francis had a vision of Jesus telling him, "Francis, go and repair my church." Taking the instruction literally, Francis went home, helped himself to a bolt of his father's fine cloth, sold it, and donated the money to the priest to restore the church building. Needless to say, Francis' father was less than delighted by his son's new determination to live out the gospel on his father's dime. In the ensuing confrontation, Francis was disowned by his father and in turn renounced wealth forever. He told his friends he would be wedded to Lady Poverty. Over the next few years he worked with his own two hands using scavenged stone to rebuild damaged churches while continuing to care for lepers and taking on manual chores to earn his own food.

In time Francis attracted followers. They named themselves the order of Friars Minor, or "younger brothers," to emphasize their commitment to humility. Women became part of the movement as well with the arrival of a young woman named Clare, who founded a parallel order of sisters and became Francis' dear friend. Throughout Francis' life he wrote poetry in the vernacular which is filled with a deep affection for the created order: birds, animals, earth, sun, moon, stars, water, fire, all named by Francis as brothers and sisters who praise God in their own way.

That love of nature is what most of us probably picture today when we think of St. Francis: we bless animals on his feast day, and commemorate him with garden statues surrounded by birds. It's easy to romanticize Francis' love for nature and picture him as a sort of medieval hippie, floating around Italy to a soundtrack on permanent loop of "All Things Bright and Beautiful." But Francis' connection to the natural world was grounded deeply in his experience of poverty: sleeping outdoors, walking barefoot on stony roads, washing dirt from the oozing wounds of infectious lepers.<sup>1</sup> Francis may have begun his vocation with the hotheaded, uncalculated act of a young man eager to differentiate from his wealthy father. A lot of us can tell stories like that. But for Francis, that initial rashness took root and matured over time into a total commitment to an upside-down value system. For the rest of Francis' life he prized poverty the way

<sup>1</sup> See James Kiefer's hagiography, [http://satucket.com/lectionary/Francis\\_Assisi.htm](http://satucket.com/lectionary/Francis_Assisi.htm).

most of us prize stuff, actively seeking more and more to have less and less. He retained his flair for the grand gesture, but used his own life as the example instead of his father's wealth. As he was dying, Francis took off his habit and lay down on the ground, covered with a borrowed cloth, so that he might finally truly have nothing. It's no wonder Francis is often called the greatest saint of the Western church, the one who most fully lived out the radically reversed priorities of Jesus.

Those priorities still seem just as reversed today. Our system—the world's system—is based on the assumption that all of us, even those of us who already have more than enough to care for our own needs and most of our wants, are motivated primarily by what's politely called our economic self-interest—what the theologians used to call greed. And it's a valid assumption! From Wall Street to the Hollywood tabloid scene, our culture offers plenty of material for any of us to reflect on the fact that money and status are powerful motivators for human beings—no matter how much we already have.

I can vouch for how difficult it is to live out a different set of priorities. Since we got married four years ago, Julia and I have been working on increasing the percentage of our income we give away. Much of it goes to church, and some of it goes to other things we think are important and serve God's mission. I'd love to tell you we give away ten percent or more of our income, but right now it's just about six percent. I'd like to get to seven percent, and I think we will soon enough, but it's not easy—because I also like going out to eat, and buying plane tickets to go see family a few times a year, and yes, playing my Nintendo Wii. Now, I'm not rich by the standards of our celebrity culture, not like Warren Buffett or Lady Gaga. But the fact is that by the standards of the seven billion people who share God's earth, I'm incredibly wealthy. According to the website GlobalRichList.com, my salary as associate priest at St. Stephen's puts me in the highest-earning one percent of people on the planet. Yet out of my wealth, I struggle to give away seven percent, while others in the world are starving. Francis gave it all away: I'm not yet as thoroughly converted to the love of Lady Poverty as St. Francis. To be truly honest, I probably will never be.

And so it would be easy to see Francis as a source less of inspiration than of discouragement, either an unattainable paragon of perfection or a guilt-inducing figure of finger-wagging. But I think that's not what Francis would desire. And I believe it's not what Jesus desires either. In the gospel reading we heard today from Matthew, Jesus says, "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." I used to hear this passage and imagine Jesus as the ox-driver, sitting on the cart behind us and placing a yoke on our shoulders. But there's another way to imagine this image. Remember that a yoke is used to harness together two oxen, not one: it sits across the backs of both animals so they can share a load. It may make more sense to see the yoke of Jesus as the yoke he is already carrying alongside us: so that it's by shouldering most of the load for us that he makes the yoke easy and the burden light. "Take my yoke upon you," he says, "and learn from me"—learn, that is, by example; not learning in the sense of mastering intellectual content but learning in the sense of imitating the Master Ox himself as he pulls the load, and gradually developing the spiritual muscles to walk the Christian journey alongside.

It's a homely image Francis would have loved. He is supposed to have invented the Christmas manger scene, and he often referred to his own physical body as a beast of burden, his beloved Brother Donkey. The name of his order is the "younger brothers": and indeed, Francis learned to walk the way of the cross by imitating his older brother, Jesus.

It's that ongoing process of learning by imitation that we've been baptized into. Life in Christ is a never-ceasing journey of learning to live by the upside-down priorities of the kingdom of God. Each of us will be learning it throughout our lifetimes, in good circumstances and in bad. Whether rich or poor, none of us can insulate ourselves from the sorrows of the world: disease, crisis, and death come to us all, and since you can't take it with you, all of us will come to the end of our lives as close acquaintances of Lady Poverty. But in the love and care of God, we are truly rich and have all we need: surrounded by brother sun, sister moon, brother fire, sister water, our companions the animals, our brother Francis and sister Clare, all our sisters and brothers in the faith, and our Eldest Brother Jesus himself. We may never advance as far as Francis in this lifetime in learning to pull the burden, to live by the alternate value system of Jesus. But thanks to God's grace, we do not have to pull the burden alone.

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