

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world... for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.”

Do these words sound rather foolish? What can we possibly make of someone who insists on boasting in nothing but the cross of Jesus Christ? What would such a person post on Facebook or put on their resume? Would we see no pictures of their kids, their travels, their new haircut, their various accomplishments and boasts? What would someone that has been crucified to the world out of love and dedication to God in Christ be like? It might seem like the kind of faith none of us can fathom...but there was a man, a small man, a little mustard seed of a man, who had that kind of faith and dedication who shows us what this faith might look like in real life. His faith was full of abandon and even foolishness. He was foolish enough to truly believe that with God all things were possible. And he moved mountains throughout his life, by being simple, humble, and caring nothing about what others thought of him, save God alone. And his faith, foolish as it may be, was also his joy.

His name was Francis of Assisi and he was born in 1182 in Italy. He founded the Franciscan Order, and October 4th is his feast day, which we commemorate today -- we will be offering a blessing of the animals during our 10am service (which those of you here at 7:30am have successfully dodged). But St. Francis is arguably the most well known and most beloved saints, and there's good reason for it.

To catch the sense of the incredible and foolish faith of the little man Francis, listen to a story from the Little Flowers of St. Francis:

One day near St. Mary of the Angels, the blessed Francis called Friar Leo and said, 'Friar Leo.'

'Here I am,' replied the other. 'Write down what is perfect joy. If a messenger should arrive from Paris announcing that all the teachers from Paris had come into the Order, write down: true joy is not therein. If all the prelates, archbishops and even the King of France and the King of England should join the Order, write down: true joy is not therein.

Further if all my friars should go among the infidels and convert them all to the faith, or if I should have so much grace from God that I heal the sick and work miracles, write down: true joy is not therein. But what is perfect joy? I return from Perugia in the black of night and I come here and it is winter, muddy and so cold that icicles form on the hem of my tunic and strike against my legs without cease and draw blood from my

wounds. Thus covered with mud, soaked and frozen I come to the door and after I call out and knock for a long time, a friar comes and asks: 'Who are you?' I answer, 'Friar Francis,' and he says: 'Begone! This is not an hour to be wandering around!' And since I insist and knock further, he answers: 'Begone! You are a worthless fellow, a simpleton. Don't come here anymore. We are just so many and have no need of you!' I still knock on the door, and I say: 'For the love of God give me shelter for this night.' And he answers, 'I will not. Go to the hospital of the Cruciferi and ask there.' And if I endure all this patiently and without dismay, I say to you, therefore, that therein lies perfect joy, true virtue and the salvation of the soul.”

If nothing else, Francis will grab your attention -he may shock you a bit as well...but it will often be accompanied with a laugh or smile. I once came across a comic strip featuring St. Francis: he was in a bar, sleeves rolled up, every man around him was laying on the floor in a daze. The caption read: “No one ever called Francis a Sissy again.”

This funny little man Francis was born the son of a wealthy linen merchant and he was a soldier in the military. He wanted to be a knight but it was a short military career. He was captured, imprisoned, and became ill. During his long recovery, watching birds come to his window and pondering their simplicity, a growing sense of disillusionment with wealth, materialism, and the corruption of the Church began to take root. But his conversion really took off when he encountered a leper one day and noticed his gut reaction was one of utter disgust. Despising this feeling, he overcame it by immediately holding out his arms to hug and then embrace the leper. He was never the same.

Not long after this, while at a church in Assisi at the Crucifix of San Damiano he heard God say, “Francis, rebuild my church.” He immediately felt led to flee from the trappings of materialism and began giving away his family's money and possessions to the needy. This didn't please his father and in anger his dad took him to the Bishop's court and demanded repayment. On the spot, in the sight of all, Francis stripped himself of all his clothes and gave them to his father - walking naked out of the city, never to return as the son of the wealthy merchant. Instead, from that time on, he wore only the clothing that beggars and lepers wore: a gray (undyed) tunic. He lived outside the city walls and became a wanderer, homeless by choice. He nursed the lepers and worked on physically repairing churches that had crumbled due to neglect. He sensed a strong call to

preach and to start a community of brothers who would travel, preach the Gospel, serve the poor, and own nothing, embracing Lady Poverty as he called it, completely. Remember it was Francis who said, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words."

Francis was ridiculed, laughed at, and had stones thrown at him during his ministry. It didn't dampen his joy. He would often break out in song and dance, being what he called a "fool for Christ." He loved nature, all of creation, and even preached to the animals, whom he frequently found to be better listeners than people. Francis' love of animals as respected fellow creatures of God went far beyond sentimentality however. He once wrote, "If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who deal likewise with their fellow men." Francis believed that our actions towards the weakest, the "least of these" in our world, from lepers to animals, was indicative of our ability to show Christ-like mercy to others.

It didn't take long for Francis to garner 8 brothers and they wrote a Rule of Life, one based on poverty and simplicity, in stark contrast to the lucrative and wealthy Religious Orders of the day. The brothers traveled to Rome to receive recognition from the Pope as a Religious Order, which surprisingly, they received. The Order continued to grow and within a few years, the first woman wanted to join: Clare of Assisi and a women's community began. They too embraced poverty and became known as the Poor Clares.

As Francis' faith grew, so did his deepening mysticism. In prayer, he would often be found lost in his visions of God. One of his visions was of the Christ child at his birth in the manger and this inspired him to re-create the scene. St. Francis made the first "Manger Scene" with live people and animals and the whole town came to see it one Christmas. Every manger scene or Christmas Creche since then finds its' roots in St. Francis and his vision...but it no doubt must have started out sounding like a rather foolish idea.

As Francis aged he had many physical struggles including a "dark night of the soul" which lasted for 2 years while he was ill with malaria and glaucoma, eventually becoming blind. Still, he rewrote his Order's Rule in 1221 (which is still used today) and in 1224 he was the first person since St. Paul to receive the stigmata (the wounds of Christ) while in prayer and meditation.

By the time Francis died in 1226, he had totally reformed the Church merely by living out his simple faith, and he had won followers and people wholeheartedly dedicated to the Gospel far too numerous to count from of all positions in life, and that included the devotion of the Pope himself. The world was never same after Francis.

Francis' mustard seed faith in the cross of Christ uprooted the mulberry tree of the entire Church and replanted it into the fertile soil of renewal, centered squarely in the Gospel by simply living it out with radical, foolish abandon.

It causes us to wonder: who will be the next St. Francis? Far from seeing this idea as out of reach, St. Francis said, "If God can work through me, he can work through anyone." Maybe that anyone is you. Francis would likely say that anyone is already you--no matter your age, life situation, or position- God can work through you in tremendous and powerful ways the moment you set your eyes on the cross of Christ in faith. There's no telling what will happen once the foolishness of faith takes up residence in your heart!

Amen.