

Happy St Francis of Assisi Day. I always feel compelled when I get to preach on St Francis Day to share my favorite Franciscan joke. It was a comic strip that I saw years ago that I'll never forget. And we see St Francis standing there in a pub. There are men laying on the ground, all around him with their heads spinning and below him the caption reads, "No one ever called St Francis Assisi, again." St Francis always brings a smile and joy and peace wherever he goes. And isn't it wonderful to hear these comforting words that we just had from the Gospel of Matthew, from Jesus on this St Francis Day, when 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."

For many of us the past six months have felt like a never-ending growing burden of worry upon our shoulders. As we move closer to the election and continue in our divisions, our anxieties and uncertainties, the weight often feels like too much. My mind is darting from one point of distress to another all the time as if being in a pandemic wasn't enough all by itself, I find that my mind moves from my children's schooling to the latest number of COVID rates, to racial injustice, to civil unrest, to threats of growing violence, to the increasing influence of conspiracy theories, to the refugee crisis, to the economy, to the divisions in our families, communities, and even churches as politics tears us further and further apart. To the fires, to the hurricanes, to the safety and wellbeing of my loved ones. And to simply how to recreate the next ministry event online.

And then right in the middle of all of that chaos, the chaos that we all feel, we hear Jesus say to us today, "Come to me, you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens. And I will give you rest." Rest. Is that possible? This word for rest can function for what will be. The rest that comes in knowing that the world is being ordered according to God's purposes for it, it is a rest under God's reign in the new world that God is bringing into

being. It is the kingdom of God. This rest is the now and not yet paradox of the Christian in faith. We know the end of the story because Jesus lived and died and rose again, and ultimately death and sin have been defeated. But we know our world is also still in the birthing process of God's reordering. The tribulations that we are facing are temporary, which makes them easier to bear, like a woman in labor, knowing that the birth pains and the suffering will ultimately result in the birth of new life. And so we hope, but it still hurts, the already and not yet.

And then we learn that we can exchange all this burden we feel for the yoke of Jesus. Jesus says my yoke is easy and my burden is light. The yoke that Jesus offers is the thing that our soul longs for most deeply, it is the peace and love we find by simply following Jesus. And it's hard to find a better follower of Jesus than St Francis. Now I knew that we associate St Francis primarily with animals. He is the Patron Saint of animals after all, but there is so much more to him. So while Francis did love animals, and surely he loved cats, even as much as dogs because he was a Saint, he patterned his life in the way of God's peace. We hear this in the opening words, from his famous prayer, the prayer of St Francis. "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon, where there is doubt, faith, where there is despair, hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy."

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace," he says. Right now, more than ever, the yoke of Jesus, that we are called to bear is to be instruments of peace. Because as peacemakers, we will so love and not hate. We will seek pardon, not injury. We will embrace faith, not doubt. And we will proclaim hope, not despair. And St Francis reminds us of the power of one person to make great changes for peace in a tumultuous world. Remember though, to embrace this divine peace is to reject false peace. False peace is the pretending on the surface that things are okay when they're not, or the smoothing things over and staying quiet and

ignoring evil and injustice. False peace keeps order, it "keeps the peace" through oppression, force and domination, and it is only temporary. None of those are God's peace. We must reject false peace in order to experience true divine peace. To experience shalom.

A piece that is permanent, is rooted in truth, wholeness, justice, harmony, health, and safety. It is a peace that only God can give. But getting to the lasting and true peace often requires some suffering and painful truth-telling to get there. It's a hard journey, but Jesus showed us how. And so did St. Francis. St. Francis was an instrument of peace in his encounter with the Muslim Sultan Malik al-Kamil of Egypt. This story of peacemaking is so powerful that it was made into an Emmy nominated documentary drama in 2016. It's called *The Sultan and the Saint*. Recall that St. Francis lived in a time of intense division and war, enmity between Christians and Muslims during the violent crusades of the early 1200s. Scholars believe that between one and two million people actually died in the crusades. And that violent spirit lives on today in many different ways. But in his calling to be a peace maker, Francis and one of his brothers crossed the battle lines into Egypt, totally unarmed. And they were captured and then beaten.

But then they were presented to the Sultan, and Francis greeted him with a blessing of peace saying the Muslim greeting peace be upon you. The Sultan was shocked. And as Francis spoke and preached God's truth and the message of peace, the Sultan saw the love of God flowing through Francis and was astonished by his boldness and his heart was changed. They ended up speaking about spirituality and their faith. They came to be friends over a period of few days, and then the Sultan presented Francis with an ivory horn. It still sits on display in Assisi today. The Sultan then granted the brothers safe passage back home. And then the Sultan decided to seek peace himself after that heart changing exchange, treating the Christian prisoners of war with kindness, and then proceeding to negotiate peace with the Christian crusaders that

eventually led to a peace agreement between them that lasted many years.

Francis changed the world by being an instrument of peace. But it required suffering to get there. It required courage and truth telling in the spirit of peace in order to achieve it. The yoke of Jesus is the light burden of peacemaking. You and I may not be crossing literal battle lines like St. Francis did, but right now we are all being divided up behind intellectual and emotional battle lines. And like Francis, we have been invited to cross the battle lines by putting on the yoke of Jesus and becoming instruments of peace, ready to greet those we find on the other side with the blessing of God's peace and words of truth. And like the Sultan, our hearts must also be open to the other, made in the image of God. And when we do that, then the Holy Spirit can work and change our hearts, the hearts that need to be touched by the love and peace of God. And as we become bearers of peace, we too will find peace and rest, God's rest.

God's kingdom that is here and is coming, is now and will be, is already and not yet, and it will not fail us. So let me be very clear on this St Francis Day, as Christians in this moment in time, we are called to be instruments of peace. May God grant us the grace to sow love. Amen.