

October 5, 2014 St Francis of Assisi. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

When I was on sabbatical in 2006 I visited Assisi. It's still a small, north-eastern Italian hill town, with buildings that date back hundreds of years. On the edge of the hill is a huge church – the Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi. It was begun only 2 years after his death in the same year he was named a saint of the Church. It's very grand, and quite beautiful. It's almost a “double-decker” church, too - the undercroft would be called a cathedral in many parts of the world.

And that's where Francis is buried.

There's another church nearby that's also quite remarkable: the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli – St. Mary of the Angels. It's as big as the Basilica of St. Francis, though it's nearly 350 years newer. It's a huge, amazing building – the grandest of the grand of its age.

Inside, at the cross-aisles, there's a small, unpretentious, rather ramshackle building called the “Porziuncola” – that's an Italian word that means “small plot of land.” Odd name for a building, don't you think?! And an odd place for a building, too – inside another, much bigger, much grander edifice. The “Porziuncola” goes by another name: sometime in the year 1204, a young man – despondent and empty, stopped in this building on his journey back to Assisi from Rome. It was a derelict wayside chapel dedicated to a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian martyr killed during the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian – his name was Damianos, and so, in Italian, the chapel was called San Damiano.

And the young man was one Francis, from Assisi, who we know as, not “from” but “of.”

He seems to be remembered mostly for his sermon to the birds, and his love of animals – though we conveniently forget that the genus “human” is part of the animal kingdom.

We also conveniently forget that no one else in history was as dedicated as Francis to imitate the life, and carry out the work of Christ, in Christ's own way. “Most admired/least imitated” is how the description should really go - because we do that a lot, and not just with Francis– we admire, but don't imitate, we forget.

On the other hand.....I think it's understandable that we forget. If Francis is the only person in history to come close to imitating Jesus and carrying on his work it tells us exactly how difficult that is to do.

So perhaps, instead, we should consider small steps.

Francis was known to spend hours at a time in prayer - what if we committed to spending minutes at a time in prayer?

And - yes - Francis loved animals. What if we transferred or imitated the love we show toward our animals to and toward the humans around us?

And Francis loved all of creation – brother sun, sister moon, and mother earth - what if we could localize that love of creation into our own world on this island? What would that look like? A lot of what Francis stands for is about attitude – about how we face out from ourselves into the world around us, best summed up in the prayer that’s attributed to him (though the earliest appearance of the prayer was in 1912): it’s permeated with a call to be a vehicle of peace (an “instrument” as the prayer says). In the context of peace we are called to sow love not hate, to forgive, to build community, offer truth, hope, light, and joy.

In all of this we’re called to be actors, not passive receivers - to console, to understand, to love, because when we do these things we will discover the great joys in giving ourselves away, the freedom of not holding grudges, the joy of finding in the act of letting go.

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is discord, harmony;  
Where there is error, truth;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

As I reflect on that visit to all three of the Assisi buildings - the two basilicas and the “Porziuncola”, I was struck by the thought that, for two of those three - the basilicas - Francis must be spinning in his grave! They are not what he thought of when he thought “Church!”

For me, the contrast couldn’t be greater. We human beings build big edifices to honor the greats without wondering how they would feel about this intended honor.

As I left Santa Maria degli Angeli, I passed a beggar on the steps, and I found myself thinking, “this is where Francis would be right now – not enjoying the adulation of the many in the two great Basilicas but out here, in the sunlight and the real world, tending the sick, embracing the poor, and helping beggars stand up.

Isn’t that where we should be too?