

# North Kildonan United Church

26<sup>th</sup> June 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

II Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Luke 9: 51-62

*Eternal God,  
in the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;  
in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;  
and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.*

In 1181, a son was born to a wealthy cloth merchant in Italy. Because of the merchant's love of France, the boy was nicknamed Francis by his father.

Francis grew up in luxury, and by all accounts enjoyed life as a wild, carefree teenager. In time he decided to become a soldier. But then one day, he met a leper.

Quite contrary to his usual approach to such people, which was to shun them, Francis was moved with compassion and he embraced the leper. As the story goes, suddenly the leper disappeared, and Francis realized that it was Jesus in disguise, and that Jesus had been testing him.

Francis lived in Assisi, an Italian town I visited in 2009. Within that town was a dilapidated church, by the name of San Damiano. One day, as Francis was passing by this building, a structure ready to fall down, he felt compelled to go inside. There he found the cross of San Damiano. A copy of it is on my office wall.

Francis entered and knelt before the cross in contemplation and ecstasy. While gazing at the cross, Francis saw the lips of Jesus move and he heard the words: "*Francis, go repair my house which as you see is falling into ruin.*"

The words from the cross burned within him and he took the instruction literally. He immediately set about repairing the building. To help fund the project, Francis stole a bolt of cloth from his father's storehouse, intent on selling the fabric. His father discovered the theft and in a fit of absolute rage he sued his son in court.

Francis replied by standing in the town square, where he publicly renounced all claims to his inheritance. He took it a step further and removed all his clothes as well. The local bishop was so moved by Francis's action that he wrapped the naked Francis in his cape.

By this public act, Francis devoted himself to a lifelong quest to serve God, Jesus Christ, and the poor, or as he put it, Lady Poverty. Unlike the half-hearted possible followers of Jesus in today's gospel, the ones who have this and that to do before they embark on the great adventure of faith, Francis was committed, taking to heart the words of Jesus: "*No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*" Francis would soon prove how fit indeed he was for the work of the kingdom of God.

Soon Francis would gather around him many friends, friends who would also renounce wealth and status and devote their lives to caring for the poor and needy. They became known as Franciscans, and with the blessing of the Pope in Rome, Francis was able to shape the Order of Franciscans, which continues to this day.

By all accounts Francis lived a simple, austere life, but he was also a joyful man. He was keenly aware of the wonders of nature, and his writings reflect his love and care for all creation. We might describe him as a radical Christian, a man willing to live a simple life of trust in the providence of God, a man focussed on doing the will of God, and on being an instrument of God's mercy and compassion in the world.

His writings reflect so fully his radical Christianity. We have paraphrases of his works in Voices United – *"Make me a channel of your peace, where there is hatred, let me bring your love, where there is injury your healing power, and where there's doubt true faith in you"* is the first verse of one of his texts.

*"All Creatures of our God and King"* is another powerful and beautiful example of his ability to put into words his joy and love of creation. When the group I was with visited Assisi, we were able to sing a few of his hymns in the church he had restored. It was a wonderful experience – until we were quickly silenced and ushered out by the ever officious Italian church guards. We had received permission to worship in San Damiano, but somehow the memo didn't get to the local church police. Not totally surprising though, since for the two weeks our pilgrimage group was in Italy, we constantly encountered broken promises or denials that arrangements had been made.

But back to St Francis. As he was approaching death, Francis asked to lay on the ground instead of a bed because he wanted to be close to sister earth.

During his lifetime, and for his followers ever since, the message of Francis is summed up with his teaching: *"Preach the Gospel, use words when necessary."* Simply put, let our way of living convey to others the power of the Gospel in our lives, and others will see the truth in action. He encouraged people to live simply, and if he was with us today, he might also encourage us to not accumulate too much junk in our homes, in our lives and in our minds. *"Live simply so that others can simply live"* is the way modern day prophets have put it.

For the sake of the Gospel Francis sacrificed everything. He could have easily enjoyed a comfortable life of luxury, but instead he embraced a different kind of richness, the richness of life as a disciple of Christ. With all he had, he served his God, his Lord Jesus Christ, and for the sake of others, he served Lady Poverty as well, caring for and blessing, in Christ's name, all in need.

Francis began his ministry as he knelt in front of the cross and heard the words that would change his life: *"Francis, go repair my house which you see is falling into ruin."*

Francis misunderstood the call. He thought his mission was to physically restore that particular church building, sort of like a medieval Mike Holmes.

The call was really for Francis to bring renewal and restoration to the whole church. His life would show that he finally did understand the true nature of the call he heard that day.

Francis was a reformer and he holds an honoured place in that long line of women and men who strove to keep the church faithful to the Gospel. People like Martin Luther and John Calvin, John and Charles Wesley, Julian of Norwich and John Knox, and so many, many more whose vision of a church reformed and continually being renewed has guided Christians through the centuries. The present bishop of Rome, also known as Pope Francis, chose the saint's name to signify his intention to live a life of simplicity and trust in God. And by all accounts, from reports of his modest housing, simple approaches to transportation and embracing reformation, the current Francis is living out the promise and teachings of St Francis.

Francis' teachings and his deeds challenge and remind the church of the true mission of being a Christian in the world. *"God make us servants of your peace", he wrote and we sing, "where there is hate, may we sow love; where there is hurt, may we forgive; where there is strife, may we make one."*

October 4<sup>th</sup> is the day when Christians the world over celebrate the life and witness of St Francis. In many congregations, animals are brought to church to be blessed on that day because Francis so loved all creatures. We have had a custom of blessing pets around that date, though for the past few years, with the covid restrictions, we have only been able to read the names of those pets. At our service last October, you might remember that we encouraged our children and adults to bring in stuffed animals to represent the pets at home. I won't make any promises or predictions for next October but who knows what the Worship Committee may come up with as we move towards post-pandemic days and greater freedom to worship. Stay tuned.

October is a long way off and in the meantime we have a marvellous Manitoba summer to enjoy. I truly hope your summer is a time of joy and renewal and recreation. It will be August when I return to this pulpit and until we meet again may God bless and keep you and those whom you love.

Let's conclude with these familiar words 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.  
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;  
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*