

“The Saint-Maker”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Galatians 6:14-18

Nobody wakes up one morning and says, “I am going to be a Saint, with a capital ‘S’.
Centuries from now, people will set aside on a day on the calendar to honor me. Churches will be named after me.” No, the people we revere as saints just fall into it, sort of like falling in love. As Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor in Colorado, wrote in her book, Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People, “[I]t has been my experience that what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly but rather God’s ability to work through sinners. The title ‘saint’ is always conferred, never earned. I have come to realize that *all* the saints I’ve known have been accidental ones – people who inadvertently stumbled into redemption like they were looking for something else at the time . . .” [p. 7]

Yet when we think of Saints, we think of their radical sacrifice, of how they allowed God to work through them, how they responded to higher purpose in life, giving of self to offer for others a profound witness to God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. We hear of their close communion with God that often included wondrous mystical experiences, and we want that, but we regard ourselves as too weak, too flawed, and too anchored in the everyday busy-ness of life to have any hope that we too might be blessed in such ways.

This can make the saints seem a little distant. Their inspiring experiences and deeds seem unobtainable for us and, therefore, irrelevant for average people like you and me. And while this brings a sense of disappointment, there’s also comfort in the idea that we couldn’t possibly be like them. Our intuition tells us, quite accurately, that devoting our lives wholly to God’s intense grace, mercy, and love will introduce a great deal of risk and change into our lives.

However, when we reflect on individual saints, like Francis, we begin to discover that becoming more saintly, which is to say more Christ-like, is not a futile endeavor. With God nothing is impossible and new creation always awaits birth within those ready to accept it. Saints are nothing more than ordinary people, sinners just like us, who allowed God to work through them in amazing ways.

Francis couldn't have illustrated this more clearly. He grew up a child of privilege in a well-to-do mercantile family, what we would call today upper-middle class. No doubt his father wanted him to carry on the family business, securing a future of stability if not wealth, an expectation that probably felt equal parts blessing and burden to Francis. That may be familiar to some of us.

At prayer one day, Francis felt a strong summons from God to "rebuild my Church." Knowing that there was a dilapidated chapel nearby, Francis interpreted God's instructions literally, and wrongly, and spent much time putting that structure back together brick by brick. He was doing his best to do what he thought God wanted, but Francis was mistaken, and that's familiar to us, too.

After a while, God managed to break through Francis' misunderstanding. He began to see that what God wanted was very different from what he thought. Rebuilding God's Church didn't involve that broken-down old building, but something broader. So Francis began to give away his money and possessions, much to the distress of his family, who felt that Francis was misguided and out of control. Again, we might feel the familiar in Francis' story.

To keep Francis from ruin and the family from public embarrassment, they locked Francis in a cellar and kept him there until the Bishop made his regular visit. This restriction of freedom, frequently imposed by those who are trying to love us most, probably feels a little

familiar to some of us as well. Hopefully, none of us has been locked in a cellar, but there are plenty of ways to feel just as trapped. And in that dank cellar Francis stayed until the Bishop arrived to straighten him out. This plan, as it happened, was a very bad idea?

In the town square, in front of God, the Bishop, and everybody, Francis – recently released from the cellar – removed all of his clothes and walked off buck naked into the forest. Imagine the scandal. This action symbolized his renunciation of worldly goods and his intention to depend on God alone for all of his needs, thus launching what we now regard as his public ministry, which over time would lead some people to revere him as a wise and holy man, while others reviled him as a weird and dangerous influence. Both of groups of people were right.

Now none of us needs to strip naked in public, as Francis did, in order to leave our old life behind and begin something fresh and new. There are other, more appropriate ways to mark that passage. And it's here, at this crucial juncture in Francis' journey of faith, that some might say the similarities between his path and our own cease, but that's not entirely true. There is a nakedness that can leave us feeling much more exposed than lack of clothing, and we call it vulnerability, something our society teaches us not to be. Being vulnerable can mean many things, but in the context of Christian discipleship, vulnerability involves being honest with God, with others, and perhaps most importantly with ourselves, about who we really are.

Vulnerability means coming clean about the fact that we are, each and every one of us, dirty sinners, but that within that dirt God plants the seed that might someday flourish into sainthood.

After this episode, Francis' story becomes better known: how he preached the Gospel to animals, signifying his deep love and abiding concern for God's creation; how he married Lady Poverty and found an immense sense of liberty from worry over worldly possessions; how he gradually drew followers and eventually founded a mendicant order of monks who, instead of

remaining cloistered away from the world, travelled from place to place teaching the story of Jesus in a way that ordinary people could understand. This latter feature of Francis' work proved to be the most controversial, because nobody had ever seen monks out among people in the world, and their message got through to people better than the sanctioned hierarchy of priests and bishops and archbishops could manage, which made them look bad and feel jealous. It took a long time before Francis and his companions found acceptance from the powers that were, and prior to that, there were some very precarious moments.

Surely, this is where the parallels end. Yes, we talk to our pets, but nobody goes into the wilderness or the local zoo to preach the Gospel to deer and kangaroos and camels and squirrels, and if somebody did and got caught doing it, then there's probably be some psychological evaluations recommended. Few if any of us would embrace a life of extreme poverty as a way to experience and express how faith requires us to rely on God alone. And it's hard to see how anyone could found a movement quite as new and radical as the friars that Francis sent forth, a movement that did contribute significantly to the revival and rebuilding of God's Church at that time.

However, we can and often do show love for God's creation, in part by prayerfully reducing excessive consumption, a habit that's become so ingrained in our lives that we hardly ever notice it. Very few of us escape the temptation of therapeutic shopping, where we buy things we don't need and won't use, at least not for long. I do my therapeutic shopping at the bookstore. Maybe for you, it's a shoe store. There's also a competitive drive that aids and abets this impulse. We envy what others have and absorb the message of ubiquitous advertising that we can't be complete and escape our insecurities unless we acquire every product within our means, and sometimes beyond our means.

To consume less is to practice a modest form of voluntary poverty through self-denial, and though we are constantly bombarded with the economic model that consumption is necessary and good, the health of our environment is much more precious than that of our fiscal economy. In fact, the economy will collapse if we neglect and abuse God's creation. The real price we pay for excessive consumption, beyond the numbers that come after the dollar signs, is the gradual degradation of the creation that God calls us to love and care for, as Francis did. Caring for the creation and exercising some degree of voluntary poverty, of restricting our power to consume, go together hand in hand, and we can choose to do this. It's like killing two birds with one stone, though St. Francis probably wouldn't like that metaphor very much.

Finally, what about this agile mendicant movement that Francis ignited, or rather the movement that God ignited through Francis? How agile is the Church today and how bound are we by habits and structures and the imperatives of institutional survival that paralyzed the Church that God sent Francis to revive and rebuild in the 12th Century? How often and how well do we reach out to the world, to the stranger, and share the good news in a gentle and non-judgmental way without expectation of return?

I'm not suggesting that we wander around from town to town, as the first Franciscan friars did so many centuries ago. That call is issued to very few. But what would it look like if we exited the cloister of our parochial priorities and found new avenues of sharing the good news with people who just don't understand it, because we've been speaking in abstractions, in code, in what amounts to a foreign language, like the Latin of the medieval Church, which few could comprehend?

I don't have any ready answers to that question, but God does, and like Francis, we need to listen prayerfully, aware that like Francis we will make mistakes in our effort to rebuild God's

Church, building up a structure when God wants us to build up people. It may seem impossible, but the impossible is a figment of a blinkered imagination. We need to dream, to take risks, to experiment, and not worry about what other people think, even the most powerful who have the potential to threaten us. Remember, many people thought ill of Francis' methods at the time, but history has vindicated his faith.

When we think about saints, we think "not us," but that's not a true assessment of how God works through sinners to accomplish His purposes. We can relate to Francis. There are many similarities between him and us, and the most compelling of them all is the love of Jesus that motivates each and every one of us. That's the only saint-maker there is, and the love of Jesus is the only saint-maker we need. Amen.