

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
Oct. 3, 2021- St. Francis of Assisi (Feast Transferred)  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

**Jeremiah 22.13-16; Psalm 121; Galatians 6.14-18; Matthew 11. 25-30**

**“For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.” †**

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‘I am gentle... humble of heart... my yolk is easy...’ Such a fitting passage for the feast of Francis! Gentle and humble, reflective of the saint and all those he reached out to. Jesus said, ‘my yoke is easy... I am gentle...’ The Greek word translated ‘easy’ (chrestos) means ‘well-fitting.’

In Palestine of Jesus’ day, ox yokes were made of wood. The ox was brought to a carpenter, measured, and then a yoke roughed-out and the ox was brought back to be fitted and adjustments were made, so that it fit well and did not chafe the humble beast of burden. Yokes were ‘tailor-made’ to fit the ox. According to legend Jesus and his father Joseph, were carpenters, and would have made ox yokes in Galilee. People would come from all over the area for his yokes. We might imagine the sign that hung over his father’s shop: ‘My yokes fit well.’ It’s possible that Jesus was using this image from his earlier life as a carpenter in Nazareth. ‘My yoke is easy... it fits well, it won’t chafe,’ he tells his followers. ‘The life I give you is not a burden to cause you pain.’ He is trying to transform the Jewish mindset of the time away from religious ideals that were based on following harsh laws, rigid rules, and impossible standards, toward the understanding that we are to live our lives as God calls each of us, individually. Your tasks in this life are made to measure, made to fit you just right. Whatever God sends us, it’s made to fit our needs. Consider your own lives, what task is God asking you to do? What burdens must you bear for the sake of Christ?

With this in mind, let’s turn to St. Francis of Assisi, who (born Giovanni de Pietro di Barnardone 1181-1226) was once a spoiled, rich, handsome young man, sheltered from the harsh aspects of the world outside the mansions of the wealthy of Assisi. He was a dandy who was fond of fine clothes and the best things money could buy, and who knew the excesses of food, drink, and pleasure. He had planned to become a great soldier (soldiers were the heroes of his age, and he wanted to be a famous one) but it was not to be. Early on, he was captured and put in an enemy prison with the poor and uneducated, where he experienced suffering, hunger, and sickness. During these days noted the injustice of the rich and powerful, who had control over others, and the cruelty and burdens such people placed upon the less fortunate and the lowly (whether they be animals or people). It is said that shortly after he was ransomed free from enemy hands, he left his father’s household and lived in the streets with the homeless, the poor and the lepers. He took most of his garments of clothing and gave them to those who slept in the gutter with him, and he also set free his favorite horse, who was too old to endure harsh labor on father’s farm. He became a begging monk and started his famous order of friars.

One of my favorite legends is that of ‘San Francesco y il lupo’ (and there are so many, and so many versions)—this one, you see depicted in artwork as you wander through Assisi toward the great monastery— is of St. Francis and the wolf of Gubbio. Gubbio was an

isolated town, which God wanted Francis to renew in faith, but they were isolated because of a great rabidly aggressive wolf who prowled the road to town. When Francis approached the forest on the outskirts of town, the wolf came out, wild-eyed, and growling. As it approached him, instead of attacking, the wolf sat before him and listened because Francis spoke to him of Jesus Christ and his love for all creatures. It's said Francis also listened and learned that the wolf was simply hungry, unable to properly hunt because there were too many people around distracting other animals. Francis decided that the town should agree to feed the wolf if he stopped attacking the people. 'In the name of Jesus Christ, I order you not to harm me or anyone here...' Immediately the wolf's demeanor changed, he lifted a paw, licked Francis' hands and thus, he became tame.

The wolf of Gubbio is not just a fairy tale to tell children, it shares an important truth necessary to us in our own day, where so many of us live in fear. For all of us see an image of 'the wolf' in things around us (people, countries, cultures). If we allow ourselves to succumb to fear and lose our calm, it's all over. There's nothing left to do but attack and try to harm that 'wolf.' But Francis didn't do this, he tamed his own innate fears and in doing so, he tamed the wolf. He believed in the possibility of the impossible, he hoped for things without all hope, and dared to love what did not seem lovable. Francis preached of God's love for us and for all of God's creatures, of the lightness of God's burdens, and the simplicity of life. He promoted a life centered on fairness, generosity, and love for all. It's said that from the time he met the wolf, he started preaching to the birds & animals, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to all creatures. Thus, he was labeled "God's fool" by many!

Talk about foolish, remember Jesus' words, "my yoke is easy, and my burden light." That's counter- intuitive. And yet, the burdens we are asked to bear for our Lord come whenever we live as he taught us, as instruments of God's peace in this world— bringing support to those in need, comfort to the afflicted, pardon where there is injury, hope where there is despair, light where there is darkness, and love wherever there is hatred. What is the burden you bear for Christ? What has God asked you to bear? A wise monk once said that a burden carried in love, is no burden at all! And that is what Jesus promises, "My burden is easy; it fits.' †