

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
Oct. 4, 2020- 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." †

'I am gentle... humble of heart... my yolk is easy...' Such fitting words for the feast of Francis, they are gentle and 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 then 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, so important.

According to legend Jesus and his father Joseph, as carpenters, made the best ox yokes in all of 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,' to tell his followers, 'the life I give you is not a burden to cause you pain.' He's 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. So, 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 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, which let no one in or out. When Francis approached the forest on the outskirts of town, the wolf came out, wild-eyed, and growling. As it ran at him, instead of attacking, the wolf sat before him and listened as 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, and he 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...' The wolf's demeanor changed, he lifted a paw and licked Francis' hands and thus, he became tame.

The wolf of Gubbio is not just a fairy tale to tell children, it's shares an important truth necessary to us in our own day, where so many 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, 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 is 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!

St Paul, in his letter to the Galatians speaks of 'boasting of the Cross of our Lord.' For most people who are intelligent, well educated, and wise (certainly to the Greeks of Paul's time) this is utter foolishness—the idea that suffering death on a cross, such painful humiliation, can bring any good! But Paul insists, 'For I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.' The marks of Jesus. Many in the early Church took this as a reference to the '*stigmata*,' or the marks of the wounds of Jesus from the crucifixion, said to have been given to faithful saints, including St Francis. While this may be the case, I think Paul is probably referring to something more general, something more common to all Christians. He is describing the scars of those things he has suffered for the sake of Christ. He refers to being 'branded,' a slave; he is branded as a slave for Christ. Consider for yourselves, what marks you bear on your body, and in your heart, for the sake of Christ. What marks will Jesus ask you to bear for the sake of God's mission of love and reconciliation?

What are your *stigmata*? Only you can answer that... and only after careful reflection and prayer. What are those marks? Where do they come from? 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? And know, it has been said that a burden carried in love, is no burden at all! And that is what Jesus promises, "My burden is easy; it fits."