

Obey

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Francis.

Francis was that rich young man who had a vision of Jesus talking to him from the San Damiano cross.

Jesus begging him to "please save my church."

The church at the time of St Francis was much like the church today.

Too caught up with rules and regulations.

Too caught up with human egos that tirelessly seek to undermine the central challenges of the gospel.

St Francis famously stripped off his tuxedo and patent leather shoes in the middle of a busy street, renouncing his father's riches and values, as he handed himself over to God.

The feast of St. Francis is particularly fitting given the readings that we have today.

These strange readings that have Jesus upping the ante of our faith.

Beginning with the disciples hollering out:

"Increase our faith!"

Which they say in response to Jesus saying to them:

"Be alert.

If your friend goes wrong, correct him.

If he responds, forgive him.

Even if it's repeated seven times throughout the day, and seven times he says, 'I'm sorry, I won't do it again,' forgive him." Lk 17:3-4.

That's what leads the disciples to say:

"Increase our faith!" or, translated literally,

"Are you out of your mind?!!!"

Now let's be clear from the start.

Jesus isn't using forgiveness as a reason to stay in an abusive relationship.

If you're in an abusive relationship, get out!

Today!

Nor does forgiveness excuse injustice or oppression.

That's because the faith of Jesus confronts injustice and oppression with the demand that we all metanoia!

That we enter into the larger mind of God.

But how exactly does faith work?

Isn't faith like building up my biceps at the gym?

IF I do all of my spiritual pull ups, THEN I can move trees from ground to ocean.

But the problem with this approach is right there in the thinking:

Because, it's all wrapped up with "ME."

My ego.

My false self.

The human ego is the image we create for ourselves.

An image of who we think we are.

An image of our own creation.

But we aren't made in our image!

We're made in God's image!

And here lies the central struggle in every human life: moving from who we think we are — to who we truly are.

The ego pushes me to look for money, fame and power.

The ego berates me as a no good loser when bad stuff happens in my life.

The ego measures me against the judgments of others.

The standards of a consumer society.

The loud voices of dysfunctional parents, now long dead, but who still have power over my life.

In the spiritual life, the ego says: "I create my own salvation!"

And Jesus replies:

"Wake up and discover who you truly are, and to whom you truly belong!"

In fact, YOU cannot forgive endlessly.

YOU cannot increase your faith.

Nor can YOU earn or deserve your salvation.

It's all a gift from God!

Because the secret to finding the power to uproot mulberry trees isn't found by Rambo-izing my spiritual muscles, but in the quiet discipline of letting go.

Of letting be.

St Francis embraced this truth!

Giving up wealth and power didn't make him into a nothing.

It opened the doorway — into everything!

Francis came to see that God needs an open hand into which he can pour his blessings, because a clenched fist can receive nothing.

It's ego that says the bar of faith is out of reach.

It's ego that chides us by saying, "keep reaching for the bar of faith, but you'll always fall short."

But as Thomas Merton recognized, when we let go,

"love steps in, placing the bar on the ground, and, with astonishment at the simplicity of it all, I trip over it, falling into the loving arms of God."

That's why a "mustard seed of faith" can move mountains!

Because it's God who does the moving, not me!

And Jesus has something else to say about how we grow into this new life, when he says to us all: "obey."

I know!

When you mention the word "obey" in polite company, you expect a sneer or outright hostility.

We erased it from our marriage vows.

With good reason!

Since the obedience that was intended to go both ways ended up going one way only.

But for Jesus, obedience isn't about domination, it's about liberation!

Jesus knows that we human beings will obey something!

The only question is what (or whom) shall we obey?

Trump?

Capitalism?

Shop till you drop?

"Freedom," as humanity defines it, usually means "conforming."

But what Jesus offers is real freedom.

A freedom we discover through obedience, not to pop culture or flag waving, but to the gentle God who creates us, unique unto ourselves.

Each of us called to play a crucial, irreplaceable part, in the unfolding story of salvation.

Like that sign at the back of the church says:

“Be yourself, everyone else is already taken!”

What does it mean to obey God?

It’s different for all of us, but here’s a few examples.

Marty and Janie uprooted themselves from Colorado to serve the good folks of Honolulu, as their music plants trees of hope among the houseless.

Cathy takes beautiful portrait photos of our houseless friends, and then shares these pictures with them, tangible reminders of their own humanity and dignity.

And there are men like the lawyer Bob Merce and Judge Mike Town, who dedicate countless hours to ensuring that those who are incarcerated are treated with humanity, dignity and compassion.

Each of these folks, just like so many of you, engage in these actions because — they cannot NOT do so!

Because they, like you, are obedient to the sublime vision to which God calls us all.

And let’s be clear.

This obedience doesn’t depend on willpower!

But rather, when we obey God, we find ourselves floating in the stream of our true selves, creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

Obedience to God makes us normal.

Obedience to ego makes us abnormal.

And so, we obey God when we forgive seven times seventy times.

We obey when we refuse to engage in revenge.

We obey when we let go of trying to control people, places and things, trusting that God will, in the end, make all things right.

We obey when we accept all people of whatever background or faith or language as our beloved siblings.

We obey when we insist that our local, state and national governments serve the poor, the needy and the vulnerable.

We obey when we feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

When we visit the sick and the prisoner.

Through the gift of obedience, illusions of ego are released, while the power of faith — is unleashed.

And wouldn't you know, but mountains of anger are brought low — into meadows of serenity!

Trees of resentment are uprooted — and planted in gardens of peace!

And valleys of despair — are transformed into hillsides of hope!

Alicia Garza and Patrice Khan-Cullors, the co-founders of Black Lives Matter, Mahatma Gandhi, whom Martin Luther King Jr called the truest representative of Christianity in the 20th century, Fr. Dan Berrigan, Archbishop Tutu, Caesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, St. Damian, and so many

of you, are testaments to the power that transforms nations and peoples.

This power of faith, liberated through humility, weakness, and obedience.

Obedience to the itinerant preacher from Galilee who welcomes all.

Forgives all.

Who dies for all.

Because indeed he becomes a slave for all!

As he kneels and washes your feet and mine, can you hear the gentle whisper in your ear?

“Follow me!”

And after we have done all we've been called to do, each in our own way, we can, with St Francis, say to those who come after us:

“I have done what is mine to do.

Now, go, and do what is yours to do.”

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