

**Sermon – September 15, 2024 – “The Wisdom of St. Francis, pt. 2: Wholeness”
by Rev. Dale Carl Fredrickson**

Last week, we kicked off this next season of our church life with a sermon series called **The Wisdom of St. Francis**. Many important things were said (and many reflections, questions, and comments from you were given), but none more exciting and vital than St. Francis’s story graced the pages of a Marvel Comic Book. You heard that right: The multi-billion-dollar Marvel franchise, which has given us heroes and sheroes like Iron Man, Captain Marvel, Captain America, Black Widow, Spider-Man, Storm, and Black Panther, published a comic book based on St. Francis of Assisi’s life called ***Francis: Brother of the Universe***. Last week, I talked about Francis’ challenge to become an “instrument of peace.” St. Francis has a fresh word to speak in a world that trains us to be consumers, critics, and victims. St. Francis challenges us to use our life energy not for consuming, critiquing, or playing the victim but to become “instruments of peace.” We’re called to become peacemakers. And that is no easy task, but each day, the world gives opportunities, as the Prayer of St. Francis makes plain, to “bring love” “where there is hatred,” forgiveness where there is offense, unity where there is discord, truth where there is error, faith where there is doubt, hope where there is despair, and light where there is darkness, and joy where there is sadness. Francis doesn’t want us to settle for being “worldly knights” with our culture’s obsession with self-interest, but to become a “knight for Christ” and give our lives for others. I am saying that the Avengers have nothing on St. Francis.

This week, as we take the next step and listen to St. Francis, he invites us to think about healing and wholeness.

St. Francis writes, or is it sings, “**O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console.**” Francis signals a shift in his prayer with the words “O Divine Master.” He never lacks creativity in addressing God, others, or nature. God is not simply human but ‘divine’ and not simply a beginner but a ‘master.’ God is our “Divine Master,” leading us into more profound spiritual wisdom. But there’s more: Francis invokes the idea of consolation. Consolation has a range of meanings that remind us of our human need for healing and wholeness. Consolation gives hope and comfort in grief, distress, and suffering. To console is a verbal action that means to have sympathy, solace, or compassion for others. Francis’ prayer asks God to remind him “not” to seek his consolation but others. Did you feel it? That subtle shift of phrase is what makes Francis important. He resists easy spirituality. He says hard things in simple ways. He stresses here: offer heartfelt compassion to others before yourself. This is challenging in a world like ours that tells us to put ourselves before others. Francis doesn’t stop there. He says don’t seek to be “understood” but seek to “understand.” Don’t seek to be known but know others. Don’t seek to be “loved” but “love, love, love.” He is saying: don’t put a spotlight on yourself, but shine it on others. By now, you are starting to see the somersault or judo move, or is it the upside-down way of St. Francis’s wisdom?

These three actions, consoling, understanding, and loving, are to take a central place in our spiritual lives. Our healing and wholeness are connected to an other-centered way of life.

All of this makes me think about Jesus. In Mark 10:45, Jesus says, “Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And then, there’s the Gospel story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. We love to tell this story to kids, but we leave out some of the hard stuff. Zacchaeus made his fortune off the backs of his friends

and family. In Jesus' day, Rome ruled Jerusalem. Rome made public displays of Jewish inferior status through chariots that paraded the spoils of war through towns and villages. Rome ruled through violence, high taxes, and self-serving kings like Herod, who was not so great—the Lord Voldemort of the New Testament. Zacchaeus knew this and still made his money as a tax collector for Rome, which made his people suffer immensely. What I'm saying is that people did not talk nicely about Zacchaeus. And then, there's Jesus. Everyone had written off Zacchaeus. But Jesus sees him in that sycamore-fig tree. He sees him. He tells him to "come down," then asks if he could "stay at his house." And I'm pretty sure we get the "G" rated version when the Bible tells us in verse seven: "**All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'**" Just like we felt the power of St. Francis' words, Zacchaeus felt the power of Jesus' love. He bursts out in verse eight: "**Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.**" Is it too far a stretch to say that Jesus put Zacchaeus' consolation before his? And doesn't it seem that Jesus held back his judgment and sought to "understand." And then, in the face of public uproar, Jesus shows his love to this man. Jesus concludes this story by saying, or is it singing: "Today salvation has come to this house **because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.**"

I don't know about you, but it's hard to remember the St. Francis challenge. As we've seen, it's also Jesus' challenge. It takes tremendous effort to put others before yourself. I can get caught up in the necessities of making a living or surviving life, and I forget to make a life. After all, we live in a world that invented the selfie. And isn't it easy to forget that we're the only ones in the photo? I forget that my healing and wholeness come not through self-interest but through service to others. Isn't it too easy to let our dreams and desires become shortsighted? We're told it's about us and to pursue every opportunity of our self-growth and fulfillment. Taste everything the world offers and find your flavor, fair, and fortune. But It's too small a story whenever I place myself at the center. In an age that treats God like an out-of-style fad, we need God to give us bigger dreams and Gospel-shaped desires.

We need comic books like "Francis: Brother of the Universe." You did know I'd come back to this, right?

As Francis wrestled with his faith, he didn't hear a voice from God but began to take notice of the world around him: flowers, animals, and people. This is how illustrator John Buscema drew this scene. And then, Francis began imperfectly at putting others before himself and experiencing healing and wholeness. Buscema depicts Francis consoling, understanding, and loving a leper on page fourteen. The scene's conclusion gives me all the feels,



“How Strange I was expecting the most awful stench... Lepers usually smell of illness and decay and yet, there’s the sweetest odor in the air. I’m glad I did that! It made me feel good.

FINALLY...

FOR A YEAR NOW, I'VE PRAYED, BUT THERE'S BEEN NO SIGN... NO VOICE.

I MUST BE MAD... AND YET, I'M HAPPIER THAN I'VE EVER BEEN BEFORE. THIS NOT KNOWING IS TEARING ME APART.

THEN, AS FRANCIS IS ON THE ROAD HOME...

DING DING DING

THAT SOUNDS... LIKE A LEPER'S BELL!

I HOPE IT'S NOT! I CAN'T STAND THE SIGHT OF A LEPER. THEY MAKE ME ILL.

AND SURE ENOUGH...

IT IS...

YOU'RE THE MOST HORRIBLE THING I'VE EVER SEEN!

BUT THEN, THE YOUNG MAN STOPS TO THINK...

"THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE, AND EACH ONE OF THEM IS UNIQUE."

I'M SORRY, THAT WAS A TERRIBLE THING TO SAY. I'VE GOT SOME MONEY IN MY POCKET. YOU CAN HAVE THAT. YOU'LL NEED IT MORE THAN I DO.

THANK YOU.

HOW STRANGE... I WAS EXPECTING THE MOST AWFUL STENCH... LEPERS USUALLY SMELL OF ILLNESS AND DECAY...

AND YET, THERE'S THE SWEETEST ODOR IN THE AIR. I'M GLAD I DID THAT. IT MADE ME FEEL GOOD!

AND WHEN FRANCIS LOOKS AROUND FOR THE MAN HE HAS JUST EMBRACED, HE FINDS THAT THE LEPER HAS... VANISHED!

The bottom box of the comic, invoking the narrator, says, **“And, when Francis looks around for the man he has just embraced, he finds that the leper has vanished.”**

**May we find ourselves by putting others first.
May we see Jesus in and through each other.**

Pastor Dale Carl Fredrickson