

**Sermon – September 22, 2024 – “The Wisdom of St. Francis, pt. 3: Death”  
by Rev. Dale Carl Fredrickson**

A few years ago, Stacy surprised me with tickets to see Sufjan Stevens at the Lyons Folk Music Festival. He had just put out an album called “Carrie and Lowell,” in which he reflected on the death of his mom. Through Sufjan’s elegant songwriting, you enter his own and somehow your grief. When I play Sufjan in the car my son will say, “here come the sad boy songs again.” For this album, he wrote over 40 songs and then gave them to a producer to choose 11 songs for the album. He described in interviews the gut-wrenching process of writing these songs and how he was looking forward to playing them live and somehow turning his grief into joy.

The night of the concert was a late summer rainstorm, and Stacy and I were soaked. We sat there with our soaks wet with a tarp over our heads, hoping the rain would relent and we could hear Sufjan. It was a miracle of Biblical proportions that the rain stopped, the stars filled the sky, and Sufjan took the stage.

A nice couple was sitting next to us, and they waited it out as well. We had nice chit-chat with each other throughout the night, and they told us that they hadn’t heard of Sufjan but just came to the folk festival every year.

Sufjan started the concert with one of the most vulnerable songs on the album. His songwriting is haunting at times, placing intimate details about his mom beside hopes that she can be healed and then the reality of her death.

**The evil it spread like a fever ahead  
It was night when you died, my firefly  
What could I have said to raise you from the dead?  
Oh could I be the sky on the Fourth of July?  
We're all gonna die**

The song builds in energy and ends with a chorus that declares:  
**We're all gonna die**

He started singing quietly and slowly, just like the recorded version of the song, but as he stated, he wanted to turn these grief songs into joy, so by the song's end, he was belting out the chorus.

I looked at our new friends, and they were troubled by Sufjan’s belting out, “We’re all going to die.” And by the fifth, “We’re all gonna die.” They started clumsily packing their camping chairs, and I felt the tension of a true fan and wanted but restrained myself from saying: “No. Don’t Leave. I promise you that beyond death, there is something beautiful.”

Transition: St. Francis encounters these moments of death and grief throughout his life. The first scene of his best-selling Marvel comic book, Francis: Brother of the Universe, shows him at another crossroads. Will his order of Franciscans survive? Do people want to embrace the simple way of Jesus? The pathway to Christian life is through death.

# FRANCIS, BROTHER OF THE UNIVERSE

MOUNT LA VERNA, ITALY, DURING THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY. THERE IS A MAN ALONE ON THE MOUNTAINSIDE, A MAN LOST IN THOUGHT AND PRAYER. OVER AND OVER AGAIN, HE ASKS THE SAME QUESTION.

WHY? WHY DID IT ALL GO WRONG, JUST WHEN THINGS WERE GOING SO WELL? WHERE DID I FAIL?

THESE ARE STRANGE QUESTIONS, COMING FROM THE MAN WHO HAS BEEN A HERO TO THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE ALL OVER EUROPE.

PERHAPS THE ONLY WAY TO UNDERSTAND HIS DILEMMA IS TO LOOK INTO HIS PAST AND LEARN HOW IT ALL BEGAN...

Mary Jo Duffy   John Buscema   Marie Severin   Jim Novak   Roy Gasmick, OFM   Jim Shooter   Stan Lee  
SCRIPT   LAYOUTS   FINISHES & COLOR   LETTERING   STORY   EDITOR   PUBLISHER

FRANCIS, BROTHER OF THE UNIVERSE™ Vol. 1, No. 1, 1980 Issue. Published by MARVEL COMICS GROUP, James E. Galton, President, Stan Lee, Publisher, Milton Schiffman, Vice-President, Production. OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 575 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10022. Published annually. Artwork Copyright © 1980 by Marvel Comics Group, a division of Cadence Industries Corporation. All rights reserved. Text Copyright © 1980 by the Franciscan Communications Office of New York. All rights reserved. Price 75¢ per copy in the U.S. and Canada. Printed in the U.S.A. Distributed to the religious market exclusively by the NCRD, Division of Paulist Press, 545 Island Road, Ramsey, N.J. 07446. No similarity between any of the drawings in this magazine with any living or dead person or institution is intended, and any such similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. This periodical may not be sold except by authorized dealers and is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not be sold or distributed with any part of its cover or markings removed, nor in a mutilated condition. All prominent characters featured in the issue, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are trademarks of the MARVEL COMICS GROUP and the Franciscan Communications Office of New York.



And then, throughout the comic, the question is raised again and again: Will he choose to be a worldly knight or a knight for Christ?



And, then there's you and me and the unfolding of our days on earth; how will we deal with our griefs and deaths? Will we write songs like Sufjan? Or build a spiritual life like St. Francis?

As a culture, we don't like to talk about death, and we sure don't embrace grief as a way of life. I once asked my therapist friend what she wished Americans would learn about mental health. Without a second passing, she declared: practices of grief. In comparison to the rest of the world, we don't do grief well. In his classic philosophy work, "Being and Time," German Philosopher Martin Heidegger described our dilemma with the short phrase, "Beings toward death." Heidegger painstakingly unveils that the truth of our existence is that at every moment of our lives, we are utterly vulnerable

Perhaps it is Because we're afraid of the vulnerability of transparency of long, loving looks into the real. The reality of being human is our fragility. It's the reality that our bodies are frail; even when we are the strongest, we can die.

Dumbledore said in The Half-Blood Prince: **"It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more."** The truth is that we're not invincible.

The Gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John show us this unknown. As the story of Jesus unfolds, Jesus must make an impossible choice. Will Jesus choose the cross? He tells his disciples that death is his pathway. They don't believe him. Even he struggles with it in the Garden of Gethsemane. But, as you know, he goes through with it, and Early Christians are eerily okay with Death. One of the verses that makes this point comes from 1 Corinthians, chapter 11 verse twenty-six, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Did you hear it? "Proclaim the Lord's Death."

The most challenging words in the Gospel story are words about death. Jesus said: "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)

*Have you ever wondered what it means to "take up your cross?" In the last section of the Prayer of St. Francis, provides a profound explanation through the key verbs of giving, self-forgetting, pardoning, and dying.*

**for it is in giving that one receives,  
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,  
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,  
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.  
Do you notice this pattern? What is St. Francis doing?**

Giving= Receiving  
Self-forgetting=Finding  
Pardoning=Being Pardoned  
Dying=Eternal Life

At the end of the prayer, St. Francis places a virtue next to a promise. It is as if St. Francis is saying to us, "Here's what it means to "take up your cross." In the last section of the

Prayer of St. Francis, he provides a profound explanation through the key virtues of giving, self-forgetting, pardoning, and dying, followed by the key promises of receiving, finding, pardoning, and eternal life.

**1. The virtue is giving, and the promise is receiving.**

Giving has to do with “offering yourself.”

It is about showing up and meeting a need tangibly.

Saying “No” because you’ve already said “Yes”

Offering what you can and what you have in the season of life that you are in.

Receiving is the promise of the work of giving. You will find yourself complete, content, and grounded.

**2. The virtue is self-forgetting, and the promise is finding**

Self-forgetting is the choice not to let your obsession with yourself get in the way of serving others. How many of us can get caught in our brains? The fears, worries, striving, and hustle keep us from finding.

Self-forgetting always helps us keep the ego within us healthy.

Finding is the promise of the work of self-forgetting. We always find our true selves by serving others.

**3. The virtue is pardoning, and the promise is being pardoned.**

The call of a cross-shaped life is forgiveness. This is one of the most challenging practices of the Bible. It’s helped me immensely to remember that forgiveness is not forgetting, it’s not pretending that it didn’t hurt, but it is the constant choice “to put down the punching gloves.”

When we forgive others, we find ourselves caught in a life-flow of forgiveness. We can receive self-forgiveness and love more quickly.

**4. The virtue is dying, and the promise is eternal life.**

The prayer comes to a climactic end. The good news is about death. The story of Christianity turns everything upside down. We die by giving, self-forgetting, and pardoning, which is why we are alive. It’s a beautiful paradox. This alternative wisdom challenges our human thinking about success, fame, and status. St. Francis challenges us that we will all face death and grief, but this pathway leads to a fuller life.

All this brings me back to that Sufjan concert.

Wherever we find ourselves today,

May the rain give way to the stars

And even though the pain stings

The morning brings joy, joy joy.

Wait, my friends.

Wait, through the grief,

the promise of new life comes.