Sermon – September 29, 2024 – "The Wisdom of St. Francis, pt. 4: Imitation"
by Rev. Dale Carl Fredrickson

Just like the beginning of every Marvel movie, consider this your action-packed and page-turning recap of where we have been. Formed in the 1960s and adding recruits to this day, planet Earth's mightiest heroes and sheroes, known as the Avengers, included Iron Man, Ant-Man, Captain Marvel, Hawkeye, Hulk, Thor, Wasp, Captain America, The Black Panther, and many more.

But as violence, fear, and shame rose, Americans looked for a new hero. In the 1980s, Marvel, through the talented drawings of John Buscema, drew the artwork for what would become **"Francis: Brother of the Universe."**

Cue the soundtrack, and let your ears imagine a sonic mix of Hamilton's energy and John Williams's epicness.

With over ½ million copies sold, St. Francis has emerged as an unlikely hero from an obscure Italian village. He is the first Christian Saint to grace the pages of a Marvel Comic Book. Could this nature-loving, Jesus-following, and peace-making saint remake the world?

St. Francis had a radical conversion. He was the pampered son of a wealthy merchant who loved clothes and parties. His only ambition was to succeed on the battlefield and become a "worldly knight." However, after being captured and held as a prisoner of war for over a year, he began to change. Through a series of experiences with God, he became a "knight for Christ." In other words, in the Gen z, middle school language of today, St. Francis gave up his "drip" and "rizz" for a "bussin" new life of "Jesus' vibes" "on God."

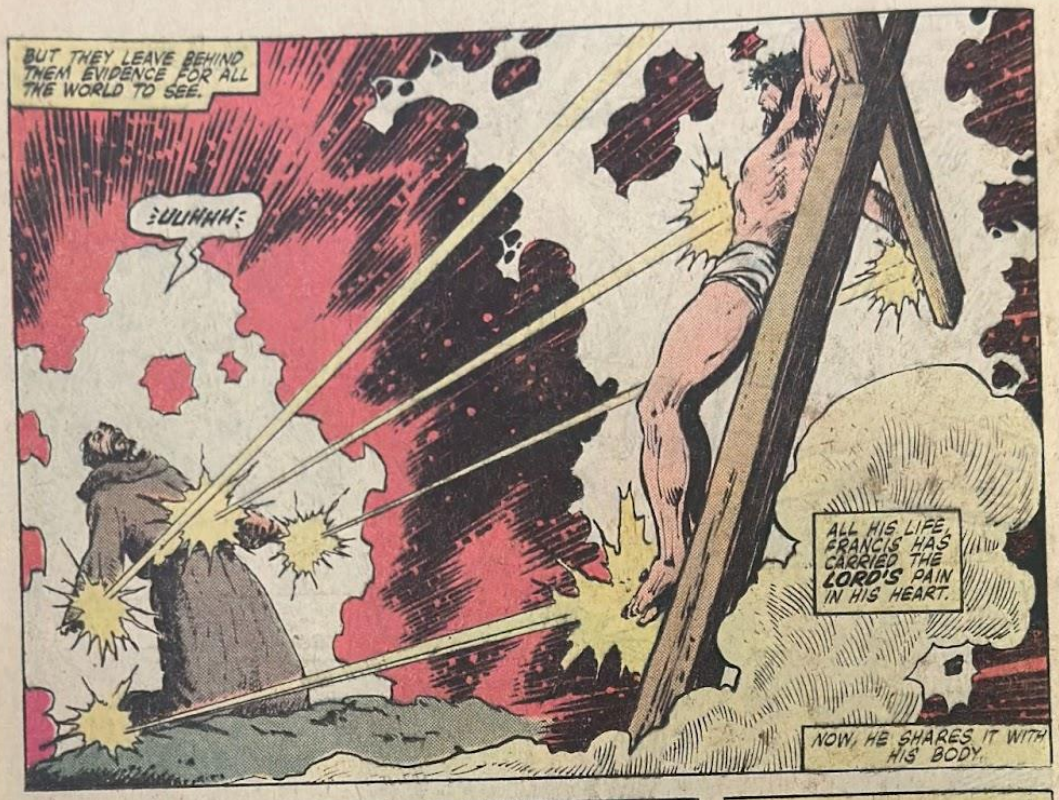
St. Francis teaches us to be "instruments of peace" or "peacemakers." His wisdom reminds us to turn our culture's focus on consuming, criticizing, and being a victim on its head. Instead, he challenges us to use our life energy to bring shalom (or peace) to our family, friends, and neighbors.

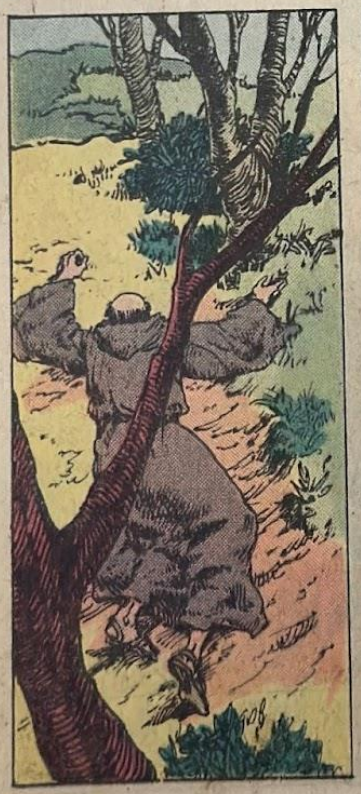
St. Francis teaches us that our healing and wholeness are connected to how we console, understand, and love others. His way is vibrant and other-centered and leads to an active spirituality.

St. Francis teaches us that the pathway to fuller life is not through denial but by embracing the paradox of grief and death. He calls this "sister death."
But the last lesson might be the strangest and the most profound.

Like all heroes, the end of St. Francis' life is marked by a dramatic tragedy. His health is declining, and his followers fear his death. With all the unknowns, Francis seeks God through prayer. But this time, on Mount La Verna, he has a vision of the Crucified Christ and a flying angel.


FRANCIS' PRAYERS ARE ANSWERED IN A WAY HE NEVER DREAMED OF!
IN HIS OWN MOMENT OF TORMENT, HE HAS BEEN SHOWN A VISION OF THE GREATER TORMENT SUFFERED BY CHRIST WHOSE MEMORY FRANCIS HAS TRIED TO LIVE BY.
THE VISION IS ACCOMPANIED BY THE FLIGHT OF A SERAPHIM.
FRANCIS IS THE ONLY ONE WHO IS HERE ON MOUNT LA VERNA TO WITNESS THESE HEAVENLY SIGHTS...


BUT THEY LEAVE BEHIND THEM EVIDENCE FOR ALL THE WORLD TO SEE.
:UUHHH:
ALL HIS LIFE, FRANCIS HAS CARRIED THE LORD'S PAIN IN HIS HEART.
NOW, HE SHARES IT WITH HIS BODY.




THE STIGMATA-- THE PIERCED WOUNDS CHRIST RECEIVED WHEN HE WAS CRUCIFIED-- THEY'VE BEEN DUPLICATED ON MY BODY...


... MY HANDS AND FEET...

The comic book writes: “All his life, Francis has carried the Lord’s pain in his heart.

And then, in a short text box in the far-right corner, it says…. “Now, he shares it with his body.”

St. Francis is given what the mystical tradition of Christian thought calls the “Stigmata.”

Stigmata is from the Greek word στίγματα and means marks. Stigmata are bodily wounds, scars, and pain that appear in locations corresponding to Jesus Christ's crucifixion wounds: the hands, wrists, feet, near the heart, the head, and the back.

For most of us, this is a strange Christian tradition that we don’t know what to do with. However, we can learn something from thinking about St. Francis and the Stigmata. How do scholars explain the medieval experience of the stigmata?

1. **Theological Interpretation**. In the Middle Ages, stigmata were primarily understood as a supernatural sign interpreted within a Christian theological framework. The appearance of stigmata was seen as a divine favor, signifying a deep union with Christ, particularly His suffering.

2. **Psychological Interpretation**. Modern scholars, particularly in psychology and medicine, tend to explain stigmata as a psychosomatic phenomenon. This explanation focuses on how intense religious devotion, extreme fasting, and meditative states could lead to physical manifestations of psychological or emotional states. Some scholars suggest that the experience of the Stigmata happened because of hysteria or psychosomatic illness.

3. **Sociocultural perspective**. Stigmata are often seen as a product of medieval Europe's religious and cultural environment. The medieval Christian context, with its deep focus on the Passion of Christ, created a fertile ground for individuals to express their religious devotion in physical terms.

4. **Fraud or Attention seeking.** In some cases, especially in the modern era, stigmata have been explained as fraudulent or self-inflicted. Medieval church authorities were often cautious about accepting claims of stigmata, requiring rigorous investigations to rule out deception.

Medieval society interpreted St. Francis through the theological interpretation. Modern scholarship tends to see this through psychological, sociocultural, or fraudulent perspectives.

We must think clearly and honestly about strange traditions like stigmata in Christian history. We want to take our faith ancestors’ experiences seriously while simultaneously listening to modern scholarship. What has helped me is instead of taking an either/or approach to issues like this, to consider a both/and. Could St. Francis’ stigmata be explained psychologically or socio-culturally in this case? Yes, most definitely. Does anything from his life and writings lead me to believe he lied about this experience? No. But is there the possibility that St. Francis did experience the Stigmata?
Yes, but I wasn’t there and cannot know for sure.

However, there are more critical questions to ask that move us beyond historical accuracy to symbolic meaning. Questions like: What is the significance of this moment in St. Francis's life? What is the meaning of St. Francis' stigmata? How does that challenge my faith today?

It should be clear by now that St. Francis is committed to becoming a "Knight for Christ." He was willing to give up his clothes, parties, and family for the joy he found serving the least, last, and the lost. It's fair to say that his writings and lifestyle show us a person captivated by Jesus in a way that energizes his very being.

Bonaventure, one of his early biographers, said that Francis "He devoted such an ardent love to Christ, and his Beloved showed him in exchange such a familiar tenderness, that the servant of God had almost continually before his eyes the physical presence of his Savior."

Bonaventure adds, "In beautiful things, he saw beauty itself." St. Francis saw in the cross the beauty of the Christian story through a powerful symbol. You can hear this in his writings, can't you? *"For it is in giving that you receive. It is in pardoning that you are pardoned."*

Can you imagine a world where the smell of death, and threat of death, and the fear of death by illness were everywhere? The cross must have been such a symbol of hope. This God, the crucified one, also knows the taste of death. And it is this death that gives us life. The Cross of Christ was the symbol of God's compassion. This God is the one who goes all with you in suffering, death, and life. It's hard for us moderns to understand that medieval Christianity didn't just see blood and guts and cruelty but a God who suffers with us. Francis saw a God who suffered with us in the Cross and a model for his days on this earth.

Another early biographer of Francis, Thomas of Celano, wrote, "Francis was always on the cross." This is a peculiar way of saying it, isn't it? "Francis was always on the cross.' It means something like Francis made sense of his existence by wholehearted identification with the life of Jesus.

Could St. Francis' stigmata mean to us today that he dedicated all his energies to compassion? St. Francis so embodied Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that he became the model for his life.

One time in Rome, St. Francis threw some coins in for the church's offering, but he walked away dissatisfied. That's when he saw a beggar on the side of the street and offered to trade clothes with him. St. Francis gave himself to the beggar, just like Christ did for the church.

His love for God in the beginning and the end led Francis to feel the same compassion that pulsed through Jesus' heart. Isn't that a beautiful ending to the story? That's what the stigmata can mean for us today. Another way of saying all this is that St. Francis lived his life as an "imitator of God," and he "walked in love" to the very end.

C.S. Lewis wrote in an essay titled, The Weight of Glory,
"We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words — to be united with the beauty we

see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it." Francis's sermon is not words but his life. He gave himself to remake the world, inviting us to do the same.