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St. James', Mt. Airy  
10/8/17

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi  
Pentecost 18/Proper 22A  
Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 148:7-14  
Matthew 11:25-30

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

The summer I graduated from college, and about a year before the 1997 earthquakes in Italy badly damaged the Basilica of St. Francis, I traveled to Europe and visited the town of Assisi.

It wasn't a long visit, barely a full day, but I remember the beautiful old city and the majesty of the sacred buildings there. I'm a little embarrassed to tell you that I didn't really know that much about St. Francis at the time.

So maybe it's not surprising my strongest memory from Assisi is of walking past two Franciscan Friars and overhearing their conversation. I was far enough into my trip that my ears pricked upon hearing familiar English and so I paid attention where otherwise I wouldn't have eavesdropped. And what I heard was one American Friar complaining to another that his sandals were uncomfortable and his feet were killing him.

He noticed me smiling in their direction, and rolling his eyes said, "You're American aren't you?" When I replied, "Yes," he shook his head, chuckled and said, "Figures. Well, now you know what we really talk about!"

Now that I know more about St. Francis, I think he would appreciate this irreverent little story.

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Today we celebrate one of our cheekiest saints, Francis of Assisi. Born into a wealthy merchant family in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Francis led a frivolous life. He became a soldier and was captured as a prisoner of war. He became very ill before his family paid a ransom and he was released. This experience led him to reflect on the purpose of life.

On a walk one day he discovered a dilapidated church, San Damiano, and whilst sitting inside it the story goes that Christ spoke to him saying, “Francis, repair my falling house.” Taking the experience literally, he cheekily sold a bale of his father’s finest silk to pay for repairs to the church.

His outraged father publicly confronted him, disowned and disinherited him – and Francis in turn renounced his father’s wealth. One account holds that he not only handed his father his purse, but also took off his expensive silk clothes, laid them at his father’s feet, and walked away naked. That’s cheeky indeed.

But cheekiest of all, is that in a time when the church proclaimed Jesus as a King dressed in fine robes and wearing a jeweled crown – like a human king – Francis proclaimed the poverty of Christ and formed the Order of Friars Minor, whose rule was one of strict and absolute poverty – another way he worked to repair Christ’s falling house.

There are so many stories about Francis – preaching to the birds, the wolf of Gubbio, his attempts to visit the holy land and his conversations with Malik al-Kamil, the Sultan of the Saracens in Egypt – to name a few.

But at its heart, the life of St. Francis points us, like so many of the saints, back to living lives with God at our center, and in right relationship with those around us.

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Our reading from Exodus today is also about God and community.

We usually call these the Ten Commandments, but I prefer the language from the Godly Play children's curriculum which calls this story the Ten Best Ways.

When telling the Ten Best Ways you pull out a heart shaped box. But before pulling out the best ways from God, you explain why God gave us the best ways:

First you show this piece, and you say: Because God loves us.

And then you add the second piece: We love God.

Then finally the last piece: And we love people.

*[put all pieces on cardstock]*

**Because God loves us, we love God, and we love people.** And the Ten Best Ways show us how to do both.

The first three? Those are about loving God: don't serve other gods; make no idols to worship; be serious when you say my name.

The fourth one – keep the Sabbath holy – is about loving both God and people.

And the rest? They are about loving people: honor your mother and father; don't kill; don't break your marriage; don't steal; don't lie; don't even want what others have. The fact that the majority of the best ways are about loving other people is no mistake, we need the help.

When I encountered this story for the first time the entire swath of this passage from the Bible made sense to me in a way it never had before. You see, I rather childishly could never fully get past the 'you shall nots' and the ways in which it seemed like such a timestamp of another time and place – your neighbor's wife is equated with your neighbor's house and ox? Ugh.

**But. Because God loves us, we love God and we love people.**

This gave me lens through which to see these words as a way of building community together – a set of norms if you will. As with all community building and boundary setting, this is not always easy. But God did not say these are the "ten easy things to do." They are the Ten Best Way to Live.

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This contrast between easy and best is found in our Gospel reading today in a slightly different way.

*'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'*

The assurance of God's presence, strength, and peace offered in these verses is a gift this week in the wake of the tragedy in Las Vegas and the continuing fear of the outbreak of war with North Korea.

As Christians we are to put God at the center of our lives. The image Matthew uses for this is that we are yoked to God. Many of you with experience on farms understand the purpose and usefulness of yokes that is often lost to modern readers. Yokes are meant to bind animals together – under the direction of the farmer – to accomplish a task.

When we translate this for us – it means that God’s yoke binds us all together – similarly to how the Ten Best Ways do so.

But just like animals who chafe under a yoke – so too do we. Being yoked means we’re not in control, God is. We’re not the farmer – God is. It means we don’t get a choice in who we’re yoked to, God does. And it means that we don’t get to pick the work that needs to be done, God does.

How then does Jesus say with a straight face that his yoke is easy? He knows how hard it is for us humans to give up the illusion of control in our lives. It comes down in part to translation, because the Greek word translated as easy also means “fits” – and in “custom fit for you.”

God’s yoke is tailor made for each of us – and we need to trust this, despite our inclination to struggle against it. It is hard, but is also the best. It is the work of God in our lives.

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This week the thing I hope you remember by lunch on Tuesday – no matter what unfolds in your life and the world – is that we are God’s people. And because we are God’s people, we are called to live lives that show the world that we, like St. Francis, mean it when we say: **Because God loves us, we love God, and we love people.**

When we do this, we are truly Christ’s heart in the world.

~ AMEN ~