

Preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary, use words.

These words are attributed to St. Francis, a simple yet uneducated man who leaned into the great mystery of God, and who expressed great love and care for God's creation and creatures, so much so he chose to give up all he owned for the poor, even renouncing his own inheritance publicly.

Although not proven definitely to be his words, they do speak to who he was and the way he lived out his life in faithful service to God and others. He was a man who preached to the bird and beast as much as to humans, but he is best known for his acts of compassion and service.

Today, as we gather to worship and give thanks to God for all of creation, especially the creatures that bless and have blessed our lives, we may look to Francis as an example of one who committed the whole of his life to the service of God and care for others.

St. Francis was known to be a dedicated yet relentless servant leader, selfless and stringent. As a follower of Jesus, he strove for perfection, yet as an imperfect human being, Francis didn't always get it right.

There were many times he found himself in trouble and at the mercy of his superiors. Sometimes, his stubbornness, short temper and self-righteousness got in the way of what he truly intended, even causing those in his monastic order to want to walk out! Yet, what he truly desired was to be kind and to help others.

While it is said that he strove for perfection in Christ, for Francis, perfection proved like it does for us all, an impossible task and one that ultimately demands that we accept and surrender to God our own imperfections, and then practice learning to forgive ourselves.

Each of us knows something about the inner drive for perfection. We may casually say, "Hey, I'm only human" and we may know rationally that none of us gets it right all the time, yet within ourselves we often hold high expectations for ourselves, and especially for others, that we think should be met. And so, we strive for perfection: to be perfectly faithful, a perfect friend, perfectly responsive, perfectly available, perfectly compassionate and patient, and perfectly forgiving.

We expect we should be perfect—except none of us is perfect. And that is perfectly OK.

Jesus doesn't expect us to be, nor does he call us to perfection. Rather, Jesus loves us and meets in our imperfection - Jesus welcomes us with all that we are and are not, when we serve well, and when we fail miserably.

Perhaps Jesus' words heard in our gospel from Matthew today resonated with Francis as much as they do with us, for they are words of invitation, of comfort and of assurance.

Come, Jesus says, Draw near to me, you who are weary, worn, and tired — Come and lay down your burdens, let go of all your worries and concerns —Come, rest, be restored. He says, for this I have come.

In times when Francis found himself overcome by the challenges he faced, it is said that he would retreat from community, like a hermit, and go off to a place alone to immerse himself in prayer, seeming to know and understand innately that to be able to continue to serve God and God's

people, he needed time apart with God. He needed rest. And it is in Jesus that he found rest and renewal.

Francis knew that it is Jesus who meets us in our need and teaches us the way we should go; that the most perfect one who calls us not to perfection, but releases us again and again from our false expectation of it, is the one who carries our burdens, restores our souls and sends us back into the world to renewed — so that where there is hate, we may bring love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, we may shine light. Certainly from time to time we will fall short, and when we do, Christ is always waiting to receive us again, and again.

Our contemporary Franciscan Monk, Richard Rohr suggests that, “We grow spiritually much more by doing or getting it wrong, than we do by doing or getting it right. This, he says, might be the central lesson of how spiritual growth happens, yet none of us wants to believe it.”

And why? Because it’s painful. It’s challenging. Getting it right and being right is so much better, so much nicer. But at the heart of our efforts to love and serve others well must lie the knowledge that we, by ourselves, can do, heal, or correct nothing.

Absent of God’s help, we wander aimlessly only hoping to find our way. It is when we turn to God in prayer and with intention, setting our eyes, as St. Paul says, and our minds and hearts on what is true, honorable, just and pure; what is pleasing, commendable and worthy of praise, that we with God’s help, may arise out of the depths and make our way forward with a new clarity of vision. We can trust that God meets us in our striving, forgives our shortcomings, and that by God’s grace, our intentions and actions will bear fruit, even with, or in spite of our imperfections.

“It is in the embracing of our imperfections that we find our truest gifts: courage, compassion and connection.” (1) The courage to risk loving imperfectly, the compassion to forgive ourselves for not being perfect and to forgive others their imperfections, giving them grace, and the gift of fostering connections with one another, that when we disappear our expectations for perfection allows us to be sustained and strengthened by one another, so that we all may be instruments of God’s peace in the world.

Jesus says, Come unto me, you who are weary and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and pure of heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. Christ awaits us.

What imperfections might we surrender to him today? And, how might we help one another to let go of all that binds or divides us, so that like St. Francis, we too might be bearers of peace, of hope and of love? Amen.

(1) Brene Brown - The Gifts of Imperfection