

Marks of Jesus

A number of ideas have been swirling in my head ever since I began planning this morning's service some weeks ago. First, it is World Communion Sunday, one of the two annual celebrations of the mystical unity of the Church within our obvious diversity that we have celebrated here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church for the last several years. As I'm sure you all have realized about me by now, the idea of Christian unity is deeply important to me. I come at this concept from the standpoint of my own determined identification with the Baptist Movement. Although I can easily claim to be a Baptist "by birth," since my parents, my grandparents, and all the relatives I knew growing up were Baptists, I can also claim to be a Baptist "by choice." My seminary experience included an encouraged breaking down and rebuilding of personal theology and, with the "Baptist Holy Wars" raging and the truly heinous behavior of some Baptists towards my then-more-overtly Catholic wife, it would have been easy for us to fly the Baptist coop and make our church home in some "middle way" denomination, such as the Episcopal Church. But the more I studied my own spiritual heritage as well as other branches of our shared Christian faith, the more I became convinced that the Baptists, with their emphasis on spiritual liberty, were the group for me.

On the other hand, it was during those years that I began my ecumenical journey, learning to appreciate and even to love the contributions that other families of Christians made to our shared faith and practice. As most of you know, I spent a significant portion of my boyhood in England, attending Church of England schools and their weekly chapel services. As a result, I've had ever since a deep appreciation for the beautiful hymnody of that church and for what in my mind is the second-most beautiful religious writing in the English language behind the King James Version of the Bible: the Book of Common Prayer. The presence of faithful adherents of the Church of Rome in my life and my ever-increasing exposure to friends across the broad spectrum of Christianity led me to value the unique perspectives and gifts of each, leading me to an ecumenical outlook.

The corollary to the celebration of the unity of the Christian communion across denominational lines is, of course, the celebration of our unity across other human-created lines of difference. It is my passion for the unity of the Church that has led me to celebrate other sorts of diversity among followers of Jesus. We are, as the old song says, "red, brown, yellow, black and white." I am deeply grateful to be a part of the American Baptist Churches, the only denomination in the United States which has no ethnic majority. The ABC has given me, a Southern White boy, the opportunity to stand and work in communion with our sisters and brothers who are Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Amerindian. Historically, the ABC has been a leader in recognizing the gifts of women, including the gift of preaching and leading a congregation. And more recently, the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists has brought the Good News that sexual orientation is not a disqualifier from the love of God or the gifts that God gives to inspire and challenge God's people.

There is another significant observance among some of the followers of Jesus today, although some churches celebrated last Sunday. The Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi was yesterday, October 4, leading to this bifurcation of Sunday celebrations. Although Francis has long been one of the most revered figures in Christianity, his popularity has gained a new cachet since March of last year when an unassuming Argentine cardinal named Jorge Mario Bergoglio was unexpectedly elevated to the papacy. The new leader of Catholic Christians worldwide selected

Marks of Jesus

the name “Francis” as his papal moniker, rather surprisingly the first to ever do so. The popular Pope has made openness and ecumenism a hallmark of his office to date. There is, alas, no record of Francis of Assisi pursuing the only ecumenism open to him and promoting better relations with the Eastern Orthodox Church but it is certainly part of history that he attempted to broker peace with the Sultan of Egypt and ever after advocated for better relations between Christians and Muslims, something the present-day Francis has also championed.

Generally speaking, when we think today of Francis of Assisi, we think mostly of his prayer for peace, which we used this morning as our Call to Worship, or of his legendary relationship with animals. Our songs so far this morning have been in harmony with this (pardon the pun). These are indeed good themes for followers of Jesus to dwell upon and we should be grateful to Francis if for nothing else than for giving us such a winsome embodiment of the peace of Christ and of the attitude of stewardship and friendship toward creation to which our Loving Creator calls us. But sometimes this picture of Francis can get a little saccharine, not unlike the once-popular, overly sweet image of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” I think especially of one movie version of the life of Francis, wildly popular with a certain audience in the 70s: Franco Zeffirelli’s hippie-dippie “Brother Sun, Sister Moon.” This sunshine-and-flowers-drenched, sanitized-for-your-protection retelling of the Francis story starred beautiful children Graham Faulkner and Judi Bowker as Francis and Clare, spiritualized stand-ins for Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey, the stars of Zeffirelli’s earlier “Romeo & Juliet.” “Brother Sun, Sister Moon” even featured music by the “Sunshine Superman” himself, Donovan. The film can be a guilty pleasure, strictly for its beauty in all aspects, but it’s a little like eating too much candy – it can make your teeth ache and your tummy grumble.

There is, however, another filmic version of Francis’ life by another Italian director which received far more critical acclaim and much less popular attention. It is called, in English, “The Flowers of St. Francis,” or, in Italian, “Francesco, giullare di Dio,” or “Francis, God’s Jester.” Directed in 1950 by Roberto Rossellini, with a script partially written by Federico Fellini, “Flowers” does much more to show Francis’ devotion to the poor and his own self-chosen poverty. The film is in black and white and there is far more mud in evidence than flowers. Far from being beautiful children, Francis and his followers are portrayed as dirty and hungry, the emaciation of heavily-rationed post-war Italy serving as a good substitute for the emaciation of the famine-stricken Middle Ages. But it is this aspect of the ministry of Francis of Assisi to which Pope Francis means to call attention. The Pope, who has given up the palatial Papal apartments for a simple room in a dormitory, continually calls on both clergy and laity to put the poor first, laying aside such divisive “Culture War” issues as divorce, abortion, contraception, and other issues of human sexuality.

Francis of Assisi seems to have been inspired by several things in the closing of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Paul’s prayer that he should never “boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world,” is one that well reflects the attitude of Francis, who, a rich young man himself, took literally the advice of Jesus to another rich young man to give away all his possessions to the poor. This radical following of Jesus is probably the thing most known by people about Francis, following his relationship with animals and his own famous prayer. It sounds sort of romantic, the young man piling all his possessions, even the clothes he was wearing, in the town square for the enrichment of the poor,

Marks of Jesus

but the nitty-gritty detail is that Francis became completely vulnerable in that moment, completely dependent upon the mercy of his Heavenly Father, for his earthly father, famously, had none. Christians throughout the centuries since have also been confronted by Francis' willingness to do what very few others have dared.

Paul's focus on the "new creation," which is "everything," also reminds us of Francis and his ability to see the glory of God's creation and, at the same time, its absolute humility. His habit of referring to everything in creation as "brother" or "sister" reminds us of our place under God in creation. We are not God, we are not Creator, we are not dominator; instead, we are tenders of the soil, stewards of creation. In the new creation, where the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, we are not to be feared by any other creature, nor are we to fear any other, not even "Brother Death."

But what really caught my attention in this passage in relationship to Francis is the next to last verse. What in the world is Paul talking about when he says, "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body?" In the Roman world, slaves were often branded or tattooed with a mark unique to their owners, much as cattle are today, and soldiers were sometimes branded or tattooed with the mark of their regiment. But Paul was neither a slave nor a soldier, though he certainly referred to himself as a slave of Christ. Furthermore, as a "Hebrew of Hebrews" and a Pharisee, Paul was unlikely to have broken the Levitical law against "marks on the skin" such as tattoos or brands. Many scholars believe this is the way in which Paul refers to the scars he is quite likely to have collected during his career as a missionary. Remember his description of himself in his second letter to the Corinthians: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked." As we say now, "That'll leave a mark."

There is, however, another interpretation which leads me back to Francis of Assisi. There is a tradition that these marks, or in Greek *στιγματα*, to which Paul refers are an echo of the wounds of Jesus. Historically, the first known person to manifest such mystical wounds was, in fact, Francis. It is a well-attributed part of his story and since Francis many other Christians have been seen to carry the stigmata. Sometimes, these wounds have been part of a hoax. Sometimes, they have been the result of unconscious self-mutilation – the "stigmatic" cuts or otherwise injures him or herself to create the marks but has no memory of doing so due to a state of ecstasy or other cognitive dissociation. But there are also verified records of those with wounds like those of Jesus which simply appear, bleed and will not heal. This appears to be the case with Francis, an early representation of whom appears on the front of the bulletin. It was in part due to his then-unique status as a stigmatic that his canonization occurred less than two years after his death.

Francis referred to his often-painful wounds as being his imitation of Christ but there are many other ways in which anyone who follows in the Way of Jesus can be an imitator of Christ. The modern-day Francis points to this with his emphasis on care for the poor; doing without luxuries

Marks of Jesus

so that more people can have necessities. It is an active interpretation of our mandate from Jesus to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Jesus himself said, “By their fruits you shall know them,” and Paul, just a few verses before our passage in Galatians reminds us of what a few of those fruits are: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These, too, are the marks of Jesus in our lives, marks that we should “bear” in the sense of “holding up,” another common meaning of the Greek word Paul uses for “carry.” If these marks of Jesus are “held up” in our lives for others to see, they can inspire, attract, and convince others that the Jesus Way is the Way they wish to live their own lives.

There is meaning for us, too, in the stigmatic interpretation of the marks of Jesus on Paul and on Francis of Assisi and it relates to World Communion Sunday. The wounds of Jesus, recreated on the bodies of stigmatics, are reminders to us that the body of Jesus was broken and his blood shed. This is the truth that we commemorate each month in our act of Communion, an act played out in churches around the world on a regular basis – for some, once a month; for some, weekly; for some, quarterly. Jesus gave his body to be broken and his blood to be shed on our behalf, to teach us not to fear death, to show us what true love looks like, to fulfill what he understood as God’s will for his life. And still, the Body of Christ, the Church, is broken. We are all sinners, having brokenness in our selves. We are sundered from one another in communities that do not speak to one another because of doctrinal issues or racial differences or politics or feuds. We are broken. But our brokenness is overcome in the love of Christ. By his wounds, we are healed.

And so, my sisters and my brothers, we are called to the table of Christ. In this symbolic feast, we will take the bread of the world, in mercy broken; we will drink the wine of the soul, in mercy shed. And we will remember, as we do, that we, like Paul, like Francis of Assisi, like Jorge Mario Bergoglio, like all Christians around the world, have the promise and the reality of seeing our sins dead and our souls fed by the one who bore those wounds on our behalf: Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, our Savior and our God. Amen.