

Lessons From St. Francis

During October, we will study the lives of several great saints from church history. We began on Sunday with St. Francis.

1. Warm-up Question: St. Francis is known as the patron saint of animals and of the environment. If you were ever made a saint, what would you likely be declared the patron saint of? (Let your imagination run wild. ☺)
2. Hebrews 12:1 says, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. . . .” Revelation 8:4 describes a scene in heaven where “the smoke of incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God.” These verses suggests that great saints from the past, as well as great saints you’ve known during your own life, are looking down on you, cheering you on and praying for you. Whom do you picture looking down on you, cheering you on and praying for you? What do you think that saint is praying on your behalf?
3. Saints do more than pray for us. Their very lives are an example that expands our imagination of what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus. On Sunday, Jeff shared three great lessons we can learn from the example of St. Francis. Francis was born into a wealthy family in 1182 A.D. He had every advantage in life: handsome, smart, and bold. He loved fine clothes and spent lavishly. He dreamed of becoming a knight who would do great exploits in battle. At age 21, he joined the Assisi militia and went to battle, only to see many of his childhood friends die and he himself become a prisoner of war. This disaster was a wakeup call that caused Francis to begin to seek something more meaningful than prosperity and prestige. Many of us have experienced a similar phenomenon in our lives – something happened that served as a wakeup call and caused us to seek a deeper spiritual life. Have you had any wakeup calls? What happened?
4. When Francis was released from captivity and returned to Assisi, he began spending lots of time alone in prayer and meditation. As part of that process, he felt called to rebuild a broken down church in the countryside. He “borrowed” silk from his father’s business, sold it, and tried to use the money to rebuild the church. His father was irate, beat him, locked him up, then held a formal proceeding before the bishop to disinherit him. At that proceeding, Francis beat his father to the punch. In the presence of the bishop, he renounced his father and his inheritance, then stripped off his clothes and walked away naked as a way of dramatizing his renunciation of a conventional copycat way of life. Here then is a first key lesson: **St. Francis reminds us of the importance of intentional renunciation.** We must say ‘no’ to certain things in order to say ‘yes’ to more important things.
 - a. Jesus said, “Take care, be on guard. . . . For your life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Luke 12:15. What’s something you’ve intentionally said ‘no’ to, so you could say ‘yes’ to something more important? What was the more important thing you said ‘yes’ to?

- b. In his most famous poem, Robert Frost says, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” What decision in your life does this remind you of?
 - c. Henry David Thoreau said, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” What do the woods represent for you? What is it that you need to renounce to take the next step on your journey into deeper spiritual life?
5. As Francis journeyed deeper into Christ, he found that his love for people around him, especially those who were hurting, began to blossom. Arnaldo Fortini’s book “Francis of Assisi” recounts another pivotal event in Francis’ life. One day Francis encountered a sickly, disgusting leper on a roadway. Francis stopped, approached the beggar, took his hand, placed a coin in his palm, then kissed the hand. In that moment, Francis was flooded with a wave of elation. It was as if he was encountering Jesus in the form of the beggar. Read Matthew 25:31-40.
- a. The second great lesson we learn from Francis can be summed up in his statement that, “**Your God . . . lives in your nearest neighbor, every person.**” Who is it in your life that’s in real need right now and you have a chance to be Jesus to them and encounter Jesus in them?
 - b. Who is someone in your life right now in whom you struggle to see Jesus? Why might Jesus be coming to you disguised as that particular person?
 - c. Francis said, “Go into all the world to preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.” What do you think he meant?
6. The deeper Francis journeyed into Christ, the more he realized that he was not just called to love the people around him, but the entirety of creation. Francis literally preached the Gospel to animals. And he referred to the elements of creation as “Brother wind” and “Sister water,” reflecting a sense of kinship with, and loving care for, all of creation.
- a. Romans 8:21 says, “Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now . . . like we ourselves groan inwardly while we wait.” Passages like this indicate that Jesus came to save all of creation, not just us humans. Does it make sense to you to preach to the animals? Why or why not? If you preached to an animal, what would you say?
 - b. Jesus said, “Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your heavenly Father.” What do you think this means?
 - c. If I pollute “Sister Water” or “Brother Wind,” do I sin against God?
 - d. If I treat an animal carelessly or cruelly, do I sin against God?