

We have a happy marriage this morning with our celebration of the Feast of St. Francis and the continued focus on the stewardship of our lives.

It has been said that of all the saints, Francis is the most popular and admired, but probably the least imitated. (Lesser Feasts and Fasts, p. 404) That certainly can't be applied to the current Bishop of Rome who took the name of Francis when he became Pope, and most of the world has delighted in the example he is setting when it comes to humility and laying aside so many of the trappings that have been associated with his office for hundreds of years. Pope Francis has often been described as a breath of fresh air, and he is challenging all of us to live lives of greater humility and charity.

The saint we commemorate today was born in 1182, in Assisi, Italy, the son of a prosperous textile merchant and a French mother. By all accounts, Francis' parents indulged his every wish, and biographers agree that his youth was spent, or mis-spent, carousing with his friends.

At one point in young adulthood Francis decided he wanted to make his mark in the world by winning military glory, and he went off to war in a battle between Assisi and Perugia outfitted in the best, shiniest armor money could buy. Unfortunately, he was captured by the enemy and he languished in prison under squalid conditions for over a year waiting for his father to pay the ransom that was being demanded for his release. By the time he was freed Francis was sick in body and spirit, and he was a radically transformed person. To his father's horror and great disappointment, Francis renounced all worldly pleasures and material values and devoted himself to Lady Poverty, spending the rest of his life serving the poor.

Francis died in 1226, and was canonized two years later by Pope Gregory the Ninth, and his feast day is celebrated each year on October 4th. In spite of the fact that Francis died at the age of 44 in abject poverty, physically wasted and spiritually dis-eased, his joy in all of creation and his attitude of thanksgiving remained unconquerable.

That spirit of joy and thanksgiving shines out wonderfully in Francis' Canticle of the Sun (that we will sing during Communion). Listen to the beginning of that canticle as it appears in our Hymnal:

Most high, omnipotent, good Lord,  
To thee be ceaseless praise outpoured,  
And blessing without measure.  
Let creatures all give thanks to thee,  
And serve in great humility.

The joy and wonder Francis felt, and all of his service to the poor, were motivated by thanksgiving. He owned nothing, he begged daily for the food that would sustain him, and yet he felt richly blessed and his heart overflowed with thanksgiving.

I read a column in the New York Times recently by David Brooks. The column was titled *The Structure of Gratitude*, and it addressed what Brooks called *dispositional gratitude*. People with dispositional gratitude take nothing for granted. These people rejoice and give thanks for any encouraging word, for every accomplishment of another person, and for the gift of each new day. This attitude is worth looking at, says Brooks, because it flies in the face of the mainstream threads of our culture.

We live in a capitalist meritocracy that encourages feelings of self-sufficiency. People with dispositional gratitude don't feel self-sufficient. They are keenly aware of their dependence.

What Brooks wrote didn't include a spiritual/theological dimension, but I hope he wouldn't object to my mention of one. People who are dispositionally grateful treasure the life they have been given by God, and every other blessing they enjoy. They're aware of how they have been shaped and influenced by their ancestors, parents and friends, and they're glad the ideal of individual autonomy is only an illusion, because they know that if they were relying only upon themselves they would be much worse off.

The fundamental premise of a capitalist meritocracy is that you get what you pay for and you earn what you deserve. But people who are dispositionally grateful are always conscious of the fact that they are given much more than they pay for, and they are much richer than they deserve. They're aware, says Brooks, that there is a lot of surplus daily goodness that can't be explained by the logic of equal exchange.

The meritocracy encourages us to view human beings as self-interested, utility-maximizing creatures, but people with grateful dispositions are in touch with a gift economy where individuals are motivated by sympathy and a concern for others, as well as by self-interest. And these people also realize that gratitude is also a kind of social glue.

In a capitalist economy a debt is repaid to the lender, but a debt of gratitude is repaid forward, to someone who may not deserve it, to someone we may not even know. It's like a pebble thrown into a pond. It causes ripples that travel outward, uniting people with bonds of mutual affection and support. We're reminded that a society isn't just a contract based on mutual benefit, but that it's a living organism based on connections that are created and nurtured by generosity, loyalty and service.

And here's something we all would do well to remember: The capitalist meritocracy encourages and rewards individualism, utilitarianism, ambition and pride, but this society would self-destruct and fall apart if not for another economy, what I call God's economy, an economy where insufficiency is acknowledged and dependence is celebrated, and where everybody wins. A grateful heart is what gives us the ability to live by this other economy, God's economy.

English poet, lay theologian and philosopher G. K. Chesterton wrote "thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder."

I don't know about you, but I'm all for having my happiness doubled by wonder.

O Lord our God, make us truly thankful, give us grateful, happy hearts. Amen.

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