

Today we celebrate the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi. He is perhaps one of our best known and least known saints. We associate him with the blessing of our pets and with statues of him in gardens, usually with a bird on his hand. Ivy and I, in fact, have such a statue in our front yard. We've learned that when the ground is saturated with waters, Francis may lean to one side or the other. Since we live in Linden Hills, we try to keep the lean to the left.

Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, endlessly indulged by both parents. His cheerful and charismatic nature, helped him sell large amounts of his father's goods. It also drew the young men of the town to noisy parties with lots of wine and carousing.

Above all, he longed to be not just wealthy, but part of the town nobility. So when Assisi went to war with another Umbrian hill town, he asked his father to outfit him as a noble warrior would be: a shining suit of armor, a sword and a prancing horse. He was given those things, because his father also had high ambitions for his heir.

But this adventure did not go well. Assisi suffered a serious loss in battle, and Francis saw many friends slaughtered. He was captured and held in prison for ransom. When he was finally set free after a year, he was suffering from tuberculosis, and probably PTSD. He had become almost completely unable to function.

He wandered the small villages around his town, seeking solace. Praying in their churches, he gazed at paintings of the crucifixion. Of course he had seen these all his life, but now the reality of crucifixion filled him with pity for the suffering of Jesus. As the depth of such a sacrifice poured over and through him, Francis fell deeply in love with God, and all God's creation.

His whole life after this became a journey on what our congregation is seeking these months – The Way of Love. As you probably remember, the first step on that path is to Turn. And that is what Francis was trying to do – to turn completely away

from what he called his captivity to sin, and into the total love of God which he had now seen. As biographer Julien Green wrote, “What do you do with yourself, with your person, when you have fallen madly in love with Love? What to make of the conversion that has pounced upon you?”

Francis did not yet know what to do, and he floundered around a bit. But when he began to work in a hospice for lepers he found his way. All of his life he had, like most people of his time, avoided and feared the ugly and frightening presence of those of the edges of society: the poor, the beggars, and especially the lepers.

Now as he gently washed the rotting flesh of these sufferers, changed their dressings, and even kissed their ruined bodies, he found the full vision of Love. As he showed them mercy, he was at last able to fully believe in God’s mercy. This was the ultimate Turn toward God which he found.

But what does this teach us, beyond broad strokes? Leprosy is no longer much present in our world, and is quite treatable. Who are the outcasts from whom we might learn? Those of you who are about my age may remember the last time we lived through this.

In the early 1980s, in our clinics and hospitals, we began to see patients who had various, life-threatening symptoms, whose health inevitably failed. Slowly the picture came into focus with the label, AIDS. It was a terrifying, fatal disease rampaging especially through the gay community, with neither cause nor treatment known. Many conservative churches called this The Homosexual Plague and declared that it was God’s punishment for their sins.

By the time the cause was identified as a blood-borne virus, we had lost nearly an entire generation of gay men in San Francisco, New York and other cities. Some health care providers refused to risk giving medical help. In the Episcopal church there was a huge debate about whether we should still

offer communion from a common cup. The stakes seemed so high and no treatment was known.

It was in this context, that I was seeing a number of patients at the Community Mental Health Center who suffered from AIDS. Most were gay men, but there were some women who had been infected by a blood transfusion, or a male partner who had strayed across the line. It was a strange experience to work with patients who were as good as dead, and yet lived.

I remember particularly a man called Tim who had AIDS, and whose health was slowly declining. Over the course of a year, We talked about his symptoms of depression, and his trouble sleeping, but also about the way in which he felt abandoned by his church, shaken in his faith. He heard that I was an Episcopal Priest – it wasn't a big secret in the agency. And he asked if his partner, John, could call when the time was near, and have me bring Communion to his home. I agreed to do that, not knowing when or if it would actually happen.

It was about six weeks later, naturally on a clinic day, when I got a call from John, "Tim is dying. He doesn't want me to call an ambulance, but he wanted you to come." Putting my patients temporarily on hold, I ran for my car and drove the few blocks to their apartment.

John brought me into the living room where Tim lay on a hospital bed. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was gasping and irregular, undoubtedly the pneumocystis pneumonia which killed so many. I had long before learned that a person may be unconscious but still perceive the voice and touch of those who are nearby. So I prayed the Eucharistic prayer for the sick, and John and I received the wafers. I broke off a tiny corner of a wafer and put it in Tim's mouth. After John and I shared wine, I dipped my finger in the cup and carefully put a couple drops on my Tim's tongue; followed by making the sign of the cross on his forehead with holy oil.

John and I sat with him afterwards until I had to hurry back to my waiting patients. As I was leaving, John gave me a wrapped package saying, "Tim wanted you to have this." Later that afternoon John called to say that Tim was gone. That evening I opened the package to find a small icon that Tim had signed on the back. I found myself in tears, blessed by having been at the deathbed.

AIDS, at its height was the leprosy of our time. Today this terrible illness is quite treatable. But there will be other times and places when you and I may well have to face the kind of crisis that ran through our country, and our churches, in those decades.

However we may respond to such a thing, we can find no better model than St. Francis, whose great Turn of conversion brought him fully into the Way of Love, which he never again left. In his own day his charisma drew hundreds of other men to follow him, becoming the new order which he called Friars Minor. But beyond that he is still one of those who can show us The Way of Love. Francis, taken as he truly was, rather than as a caricature of sweetness, can light the way to Jesus, to the Kingdom of God, and at last to our true Home.