

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi  
Matthew 11:25-30  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Oct. 5, 2008  
The Rev. John Spicer

### **The Joy of Outreach Ministry**

Thank you, Joy, for that wonderful reflection on the work of our Outreach Commission and the difference that outreach ministry makes in the lives of the people we touch. I want to underscore a couple of points Joy was making because I think they're so significant – and because they set the stage for an even deeper mystery about outreach work.

First: As Joy said, the fact that we've devoted 3 percent of our pledged income to outreach means that we've been able to have real impact with our giving, both in Kansas City and abroad. For example, the scholarship we're funding for the Culinary Cornerstones training program will help a former client at the "soup kitchen" move out of the cycle of poverty and into the self-sufficiency of a career. The scholarship we're funding for the Maison de Naissance birthing center means that a person of promise and talent in Haiti will be trained as a nurse midwife, transforming that person's future *and* giving the birthing center another high-quality staff member. Those scholarships aren't simply nice ways for the church to use its money; they are moments that change lives. And they've happened because of your pledges.

But Joy also pointed out a second way that outreach ministry works, and that's by affirming the presence of Christ in the people considered "the least" of society. It's fair to wonder how much good it really does to give a rain poncho or some new socks to someone who lives on the street. Well, on one level, it's hard to overstate the significance of a rain poncho for someone who's otherwise soaking wet in a storm. But on a deeper level, the rain poncho and fresh socks say to that person, "In you, I don't just see someone who needs my help. In you, I see Jesus Christ, whose help *I* need." When we acknowledge the presence of Christ in someone whom society rejects, we proclaim the truth of God's presence for all of us in a way that no sermon ever could.

So both these aspects of outreach ministry are huge. But, as I said, there's an even deeper mystery at work here. And the person we're honoring this morning, St. Francis of Assisi, helps us catch a glimpse of that mystery.

When you think of St. Francis, you probably picture a garden statue of a monk with cute little animals all around him. That represents part of his story – the way Francis embraced all the elements of creation as his sisters and brothers. And we'll honor this part of his story with our pet blessing here this afternoon.

But his connection with creation reflects something more important: his devotion to God through the practice of simplicity and poverty. Francis took it as an article of faith that what God provided in creation was enough – and he took that idea to the extreme.<sup>1</sup> In church one day, in the year 1208, he heard the account in Luke's Gospel of Jesus calling his disciples to go out and proclaim the kingdom, taking with them no money, or extra clothes, or even shoes – and Francis

took that call to heart. He gave away literally everything he owned except a rough woolen robe, the clothing of the poorest peasants; and he began travelling around the Italian countryside, preaching the Good News of Christ and calling people to love one another. He would work alongside local laborers to earn his food; and where he couldn't find work, he would beg. He slept wherever the Spirit led him – in barns or caves or church porticoes. He cared for the sick and the poor, ministering to lepers whom no one else would approach. And maybe most remarkably, what he reflected to the people he encountered *wasn't* judgment or doom or righteous indignation at his society – it was *joy*. Having devoted himself to poverty, and homelessness, and serving the poor, Francis found the *last* thing we'd expect him to find. He found the kind of deep satisfaction with life that most of us only dream about.

He also found something else *he* certainly never expected: celebrity status. Francis attracted great crowds because of the simple, joyful, homespun homilies he would preach. His message and his way of life drew thousands to follow in his footsteps by giving up their possessions, joining his order, and embracing a life of poverty and proclamation of God's goodness. Though he didn't set out to do it, Francis ended up founding one of the major monastic movements in medieval Europe.

And what exactly does all this have to do with outreach ministry? Well, we have to look a little further back into Francis' own story. As a young man, Francis was a stereotypical spoiled brat. He came from a very wealthy family in Assisi; his father was a cloth merchant. So young Francis lived "the good life": He didn't study very hard; he never really finished his education; he wasn't interested in taking over his father's business – and yet his parents indulged him and gave him whatever he wanted. Mostly what he wanted was to party with the other young nobles in his crowd. But even at that point, Francis was beginning to realize that his life was basically empty.

Then one day, riding from one village to another, Francis suddenly came upon a leper. Of course, lepers were the most rejected people of their day. Desperately poor, grossly disfigured, and thought to be highly contagious, they were kept literally on the margins of village life. Instinctively, Francis turned away and began to avoid the leper. But instead, something drew him to turn toward the afflicted man. Managing to overcome his disgust, Francis embraced the leper and gave him all the money he was carrying.

Not long afterward, Francis was making a pilgrimage to Rome to visit the tomb of St. Peter. There in Rome, an urban center even then, Francis found poverty on a scale he hadn't known before. He was offended at the presence of such suffering in the midst of plenty, and he again emptied his purse to help the beggars around him. But then he took his identification with the poor one step farther. He exchanged the fine clothes he was wearing for the filthy clothes of one of the beggars, and he stood there at St. Peter's for the rest of that day, going hungry along with all the other street people begging from the wealthy pilgrims.

Those moments of standing in solidarity with the poor helped change Francis forever. When he returned home to Assisi, he couldn't go back to the life he had known. Instead, he gave up his inheritance, renounced his family's wealth, and began his new life of poverty and proclamation.

His encounter with “the least” of his world had changed his heart and led him into a new life – a life of service, yes, but also a life of tremendous joy.

My point is this: Although outreach ministry certainly helps others, its greatest effect may well be on us when we do it. Like Francis, we tend to look to the culture around us to give us happiness and satisfaction, and we have to admit that what it offers is really pretty empty. But when we go to the Kansas City Community Kitchen, or to Haiti, and when we serve people who embody the presence of Christ himself, we find our hearts changed, too. It’s one of the deepest joys we can know on this side of eternity, the joy of giving ourselves away. And those who give the most are those who live most joyfully. Rather than weighing us down, this “burden” actually sets us free. As Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

As you leave this morning, you’ll find something in the narthex that you wouldn’t expect to see – a bunch of helium balloons. They’re meant as reminders of the way outreach ministry eases our burdens. I invite you to take one with you to help you remember this deep mystery: that when we serve others, we do relieve their burdens and lift their spirits; but the real transformation happens within us, because serving Christ in “the least of these” causes our own hearts to soar.

1. The biographical information that follows is taken from the article “St. Francis of Assisi” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06221a.htm>. Accessed Oct. 3, 2008.