

Open Table Community Church
Advent Devotional

2018

Week 2: Peace



Introduction

Each week of Advent has a theme. Week one is HOPE. Week two is PEACE. Week three is JOY. Week four is LOVE. In this Devotional, we will be tracking the life of Francis of Assisi, or if you were raised Catholic as I was, Saint Francis. Francis lived in the Middle of the Middle Ages (1181-1226) and not only lived a unique life but set the tone for Monastic living to this day.

Above all else, Francis was so fully committed to God that it drove him to live an amazingly counter cultural life. Through this Advent season I will be challenging us to live as though we are different from the world. I'm not asking anyone to be Saint Francis but I do believe that the season of Advent is the perfect time to see how "Francis" you can get. How much can you go against the grain in this chaotic holiday season. How countercultural can you get?

Scripture Reading

Philippians chapter 2

Ephesians 4:1-6

Devotional Reading

Saint Francis, once he had committed himself to a life of poverty and evangelism, quickly established himself as an oddity. Though many had heard the Matthew chapter 10 verses 9-10, “Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food”, no one had seen someone attempt to apply this verse literally. Francis could imagine no other way to approach the Scripture than literally. If the Bible told him to do something, then that was what he was supposed to do. Many people found this approach to Scripture refreshing compared to the hypocrisy that had grown up in the Church. Before long, Francis found that others were attracted to his authentic approach to the Faith.

Francis began to collect followers. Some beggars were attracted to Francis’ devotion, having previously felt that they could not fully approach God in their socioeconomic state. What was more surprising was the fact that several wealthy men left their lives of luxury to join Francis’ growing brotherhood. During a mass, not long after he had initiated his eleventh follower, Francis heard a homily on Matthew 10 where Jesus sends out the 12 to preach the kingdom and do good deeds. Realizing that this brotherhood numbered 12, counting himself, Francis heard the call to obey the passage. Francis traveled to Rome to receive the blessing of Pope Innocent III as an official brotherhood of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope granted the Franciscan order an informal admittance stating that the order would need to grow in numbers and effectiveness (evidence that God was using them) to be formally granted missionary status. Francis was elated. He and his followers were tonsured and now had the permission of the church to preach the Gospel.

Francis and his brotherhood began to preach. Dressed in burlap tunics, the Franciscans went from town to town preaching to common people and helping with ordinary chores and throwing themselves on the mercy of the townsfolk for their daily bread. Their number grew more quickly than any other previous monastic order. Francis’ work ethic was feverish. He was said to preach in an average of five towns per day and often as many as eight. His love was infectious, but he received as much love as he gave as he forged a genuine connection with every town that he ministered to. This connection led to one of the most monumental events in the friar’s life.

One of the darkest shadows on Francis' travels was the obvious pain, vacancy and resulting bitterness in the villages of Italy left as the results of the Crusades. Families were left without providers, hearts were slowly broken as wives and mothers awaited news that was incredibly rare, and the intensity of the hate that was rampant in the villages, broke Francis' heart. Francis found it much harder to convince people that Jesus wanted us to love our enemies than he did convincing people that Jesus wanted us to live free of financial luxury. Francis decided to become an ambassador of Peace.

Traveling to Egypt with another friar, Francis set about converting the Muslim Sultan. Christian forces had besieged the city of Damietta. The Sultan, al-Kamil had brought an army to free the city and a brutal battle had ensued. During a mutually agreed upon cease-fire, Francis crossed the battle line against the orders of the Christian commanders. He was given up for dead. Francis was in fact received by the Sultan and what they spoke of has been fodder for many legends. Some say that Francis secretly converted the Sultan. Some say the Sultan assumed Francis was insane but was amused by the Christian friar, so Francis was allowed to live. The truth is, no reliable accounts of what was discussed ever left the tent where Francis and the Muslim Sultan met. What we do know is that Francis had an open invitation to return any time he wished. Muslim soldiers were commanded to let Francis, or his brothers pass freely through battle lines and to be given passage to the Sultan. Also, Franciscan monks were invited to visit the Holy Places in the Muslim held territory and even share their gospel there. To this day, Franciscan Monasteries flourish in these areas.

Francis could not ignore a scripture that commanded him to preach the Gospel and to do so while holding no money. Likewise, he could not ignore a scripture that commanded him to love his enemy. Francis took scripture seriously. He could not imagine a world where God did not love the Muslim as much as the Christian. They may not obey Scripture. They may not worship Jesus. They may even live blatantly ungodly lives. To Francis, this meant that their souls needed to be converted, not killed. He felt that Peace would be more powerful than war. The opening lines to Francis' most famous prayer are "Lord, make me an instrument of Your Peace". To Francis these were not idle words. He lived these words in a way that was as extreme as everything else he did in his life. The Muslim was truly hated in Medieval Italy. HATED. Killing a Muslim was not only allowed, it was rewarded, eternally. The church offered indulgences for those would commit to ridding the world of this plague. The Sultan was the pinnacle of that evil. Francis' decision to show love, at huge personal risk, to the head of this great serpent, constitutes the man's commitment to Peace. For the rest of his short life, Francis counted the Sultan a friend. Though it is unlikely that Francis converted al-Kamil to faith in Jesus, he proved that Peace is possible in our hearts if not in our world.

Advent is the season of Peace. It's the season that we lay down strife. If part of our hearts are consumed in holding a grudge or waiting for our opportunity to prove "the other side" wrong, then that is one part of our hearts that can not be consumed with waiting for Jesus. As we decrescendo this Advent season, we must necessarily quiet our hearts. Just slowing down your life is not enough. To do this, we must let go of strife. It is too heavy to hold on to. Drop the weight of always being right. Your heart will be lighter if you do.

Discussion Questions

For Kiddos:

Do you have anyone at School that you don't get along with?

What would it look like if you chose to be nice to them even if they weren't nice to you?

Do you think you could do that?

What makes it hard to do?

For All:

Do you have any family members that you only see at Christmas?

Do any of these family members add stress to the Holidays?

What do you think it would take to make that interaction less stressful?

Are you a "Merry Christmas" person or a "Happy Holidays" person? (Why?)

If you prefer "Merry Christmas" what do you think about those who prefer "Happy Holidays"? If you are "Happy Holidays" what do you think about those who prefer "Merry Christmas"?

What can you do to more understand and sympathize with those who prefer the seasonal greeting other than yours?

Challenges

This week try to catch an argument of disagreement midstream and see if you can stop it by apologizing or doing something kind for the other person. If you have kiddos. Listen for the little squabbles and take a little time to walk them through the process of seeing things from the other persons side.

Francis literally crossed a barrier to show peace. Try it. Give a gift to someone who you think is on “the other side”. Whether it’s a political barrier, a religious barrier, a racial barrier, a philosophical barrier or any other wall that separates you from another human, breach the divide with kindness. The more natural animosity you feel for that “type” of person the better. Be an instrument of God’s Peace.