

Open Table Community Church
Advent Devotional

2018

Week 3: Joy



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 3

Psalms 126

Devotional Reading

The growth of the Franciscan Order was inexplicable. Francis offered none of what medieval society was seeking. In a culture that had been long ruled by either royalty/nobility or The Church, a fairly new class of merchants were finding wealth and power. This filled European culture with a hope that hadn't previously been there. For the first time, an enterprising individual could advance his status in life. One could work hard and acquire more. Because wealth was actually attainable, many sought it and most desired it. It was into this culture that Francis walked wearing his burlap robes.

Francis clearly had a magnetic personality. When he was young, he was the ringleader of all of the youth of Assisi. People were naturally drawn to him. But as many people with great resources have experienced, it was difficult for Francis to be able to tell if people were drawn to him or to his wealth. Francis' assumption was the latter. When the young man committed his life to poverty, he assumed that his following would end immediately. Francis was prepared to be lonely as well as poor. Instead, Francis found community among the beggars of Assisi. What struck Francis the most was how sincere and joyful this group of people were despite their lot in life. Francis claimed that he had seen a beggar steal food and then openly and earnestly thank God for the meal. Francis believed that the beggar had an access to gratitude that those with resources did not have. Francis desired to know a relationship with God this genuine and unencumbered by possessions.

As he committed to know God the way that his impoverished friends knew God, Francis found that his naturally magnetic personality was even more compelling than it had been before he walked away from his wealth. It turned out that people were intrigued and drawn to someone who was able to access genuine joy that was independent of possessions. Francis had a love for

and connection to nature as God's beautiful work of art. Many found this refreshing. Francis believed that society had grown so accustomed to viewing nature only as a list of resources that they had forgotten how to see its beauty. He felt that to look at a tree and see the wood for a house was akin to viewing a beautiful painting and only seeing the bag you could make from the canvas. The simple joy that Francis took in nature was unique and refreshing enough to spawn countless legends about the monk's connection to all living things.

Francis' simple but deep joy was not reserved to nature. He found the same simple pleasure in the Church. Francis felt the call to rebuild and reform the church which was clearly in bad shape. What made Francis an enigma was that he approached this reform from a place of deep love. Francis was noted for his deep passion for the Mass and for his deep emotional connection to Eucharist (communion). Many observed Francis driven to tears by the simple act of receiving the communion elements. Francis had no desire to tear down the church, but to aid and restore the institution that he was madly in love with. This lent his teachings and his his lifestyle an authenticity that many in the Church struggled to achieve.

Francis was born with the proverbial silver spoon in his hand. His father was a rich cloth merchant and Francis received the best of everything. This is important because having finished his life a poor monk who begged for his sustenance, people couldn't dismiss him as someone who was simply trying to make the best out of a bad situation. Francis chose to strip his life down to nothing so that he could take true joy in the things that were left. Because of this, Francis took great joy in people, in nature, and in The Church. This joy made other people want what he had. No monastic order had over grown as fast as the Franciscans. People sensed that by possessing nothing, Francis had discovered a way to possess more than anyone else.

I am certainly not suggesting that any of us walk away from our lives to live a monastic life of poverty. Francis stands out in history for a reason. Most of us are not called to that life. But the monk of Assisi does teach us a great deal about true joy. We tend to associate joy with the the feeling we get when everything goes well. We feel joyful when things are good at work, when there's money in the bank, when our kids are acting the way they should, when our bodies are healthy, and when our plans are working out as we had hoped. Francis found this type of joy to be fleeting. By choosing to take joy in the fundamental things of life and mostly in Jesus' sacrificial love for him, Francis found a joy unshakable. Advent is the season to stop long enough to look through all of the trappings in our lives and see if we can truly take joy in the simplest truth of the universe; Jesus loves you enough to show up.

Discussion Questions

For Kiddos:

Have you ever been surrounded by toys but still been bored?

Have you ever taken something worthless like a cardboard box and had a great time with it?

Why do you think it's more enjoyable when you have to use your imagination to have fun?

When we know how fun simple things can be, why do you think we spend so much time wanting fancier stuff?

For All:

Do you think you would be upset if you got nothing for Christmas this year?

If you had to choose between the Christmas gift of your dreams OR a healthy family, which would you choose?

Assuming you chose "healthy family", why do you think it's so hard to take joy in simple health on a daily basis?

Does knowing that Jesus loves you enough to leave heaven and endure humanity for you, strike you as an academic reality to know, or an emotional experience that produces great joy?

Challenges

Make a list of the absolute most important things in your life. After you do, try to narrow the list down even more. Meditate on the list until you are confident that it is **ONLY** the most important things. Ask yourself how much time you spend taking joy in that list. If you don't spend enough time as you feel you should, spend this week doing better.

Francis is known for his love of animals. He is actually credited for making the very first nativity and is responsible for the attending animals that we have all grown so accustomed to. Stories abound of Francis preaching to birds and making social agreements with a wolf that was ravaging a town. Francis was literally the first tree hugger as he would often embrace trees to best experience the texture of their bark reveling in the variety God used in creation. He believed that the only thing it took to truly take joy in nature was to look at it as it is and not as

something to be consumed. This week, try to be mindful of things that you can enjoy without consuming them. Focus on things that are still completely free for others to enjoy even if you enjoy them to the fullest. Suggestions: music, christmas lights, a good Movie, fresh air, a good book, etc.