

6.22.25 Sermon Transcript – St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi

So if I say St. Francis, what do you picture? What comes to your mind? You can just call it out. What comes to your mind when I say St. Francis? Sure, hospitals – nearby we have one of the many St. Francis hospitals. What else do you picture? Animals. Yeah, those are the two big ones. We think of hospitals and we think of these pictures of St. Francis with like a bird on his shoulder and a squirrel at his foot and a deer grazing nearby. That's what we picture when we picture St. Francis. I bet St. Clare is probably much less well-known. I'm willing to guess you don't really have a picture in mind when you think of St. Clare, but St. Francis and St. Clare were contemporaries. They both lived in Assisi during the late 1100s, the early 1200s, and they were close friends. St. Francis inspired St. Clare, and they assisted one another in ministry and in living out their vocation. Now, there are more modern stories about how St. Francis and St. Clare were involved romantically, but that is not true. That doesn't have any basis in reality. They did, however, have a close spiritual friendship, and St. Francis did eventually help St. Clare establish her own religious order and her own convent called the Order of the Poor Ladies, also known as the Poor Clares.

Today, I want to look at the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare to see what we can learn from them. You see, they lived right in the midst of the time period of the Crusades. The Crusades lasted for about a 200-year period between the late 100s and the late 1200s. And of course, during that time, Christians bearing the Christian symbols, the Christian flag, were trying to gain or take control of the Holy Land. It was a war between Christians and Muslims, and there was this idea of holy war that was lifted up – that somehow the Christianized West was destined by God, ordained by God, to grow and to seize control. This is the time in which St. Francis and St. Clare lived. Through their lives, we see that they stood as a witness against this idea of holy war, this idea of expanding empire and using violence to do so

Today, I to share some of their stories about how they came to be called and how they discerned their vocation of serving God, but I also want to tell a couple of specific stories that I think can both inspire and challenge us today. So St. Francis, as you know, is the better-known saint of these two. You may have heard something of his conversion story before – but St. Francis was born into wealth and privilege in Assisi in the late 1100s. As a young man, he was known for his charm, and he was known for his dream of becoming a knight, and he was known as one who loved pleasure. He was living it up as a wealthy, noble son in Assisi. But then there were events that led to his conversion. One time when he was praying in the church of San Damiano, and as he was praying there, he heard a voice speaking to him that said, “Francis, go and repair my house, which as you can see is falling into ruin.” And so he heard that initially and felt a call to, well, use what he had to help literally rebuild churches that were crumbling – to rebuild abandoned chapels, buildings with his own hands, with his own resources. But eventually he realized that no, that was not actually the call. He was actually called not to repair buildings, but to renew the church itself, as he began to see had really drifted from the call of the early church. Eventually in this really big, dramatic public act, he renounced his inheritance and he laid aside all of his

fine clothing and he went before the Bishop of Assisi declaring God as his only Father. He quite literally got rid of everything that he had and started living a totally different way. He started embracing a life of poverty, of simplicity, of service, and he lived in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. He began preaching and teaching about repentance and about love and peace and all of creation and the place of all of creation in God's work. He founded the Franciscan order. And so Francis had this radical change of heart and this radical change of relationship to empire, to wealth.

St. Clare's story is similar in many ways. She wasn't that much younger than Francis, about 13 years younger than him. She was born at the very end of the 1100s, and she too was born into a wealthy family in Assisi. And even so, she did show a deep sense of spirituality from a young age, and she desired a life of holiness. She didn't want to follow her family's expectations of her. When she was young and in her late teens, she had an experience where she heard St. Francis preach. She was very affected by not only his teachings, but the way in which he actually lived. When she turned 18, and it was actually the night of Palm Sunday, that Clare secretly fled her home and she went to a chapel, Our Lady of the Angels where St. Francis received her. And there she too, (while it wasn't such a public act), went through this dramatic symbolic action where she laid aside her fine clothes and she received a simple robe and she had her hair cut as a sign of renouncing her former life. She then went on to live and to embody the same kind of practices as St. Francis, and again, eventually formed the Order of the Poor Ladies.

St. Francis and St. Clare, had some significant moments in their life. They renounced empire, they renounced wealth, they renounced status, and sought to live in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, but they're also known for the ways in which they practiced non-violence and peaceableness as faithfulness to the gospel. So again, remember, they're living in the midst of the time period of the Crusades, where this idea of holy war is held up as something significant and important – that this is what Christians are supposed to do, to come in and take control of what is “rightfully theirs.” Well, Francis and Clare did not feel that way, and so they challenged that mindset.

There's one particular story about Saint Francis that has always stuck with me, and that's the story of this encounter that he has with Sultan al-Kamil, in 1219. So here's the Sultan, the head of the people who were supposed to be Francis's enemies. He was the leader of the Muslims who the Christians were fighting against, who they were trying to take the Holy Land from. And the story is that Saint Francis snuck across enemy lines and he only had one companion with him. He did not carry weapons or shields or anything else. He went across with one person completely unarmed in order to meet with the Sultan. He was captured and he was brought before the Sultan. And then rather than being killed, he was actually received graciously and respectfully by the Sultan. He got to talk with the sultan, and they had actual dialogue. Some accounts say that Francis preached Christ, but without violence or judgment or coercion. He didn't make any threats of hell. He just testified to the love of God and Jesus. The Sultan, with curiosity and with hospitality, was impressed by Francis's humility and his courage to cross enemy lines unarmed with no

intentions of doing violence or harm. So Francis, in this conversation with the Sultan, challenged the use of violence by both Christians and Muslims alike and he emphasized peace and love and the conversion of the heart over conquest. Some traditions and stories around this encounter say there was theological debate. Others say they just shared about their faiths respectfully but then the Sultan, after their conversation, offered Francis safe passage and gifts, though Francis only received one small token. He refused the rest. He didn't convert the Sultan and the Sultan didn't convert him, but they encountered one another with mutual respect. Francis returned to the crusader camp unharmed, and Francis himself was changed by this encounter. It further shaped his commitment to peace, to dialogue, and even later on, the Franciscan mission amongst Muslims, emphasized presence over proselytizing them. Francis took a very different approach. He did not come to the enemy lines and cross them with intent to harm, with intent to hurt, with intent to conquer. He came with the intent to foster dialogue, relationship, and peaceableness between people.

There's another story now with St. Clare. St. Clare ended up being the abbess of a convent. And a number of years later, about 20 or so years later after this encounter that Francis had with the Sultan, there was another moment in time where Christian-Muslim tensions were on the rise again. Saracen mercenaries were attacking parts of Italy, and that included Assisi where Clare's convent was located. She looks out from her convent and she sees that there are enemies approaching with the intent to do harm, with the intent to destroy. She lived with her sisters in this convent, and it was vulnerable. It was outside of the city walls. They were remote. They were unarmed, and so here come those with the intent to destroy, and so naturally, I don't know about you, but if I were in that situation, I would probably start to panic a little bit, and that's what the sisters begin to do. Clare is starting to worry about what will happen to them. Will they be assaulted? Will they be killed? Will they be enslaved? Those were common fates during raids. Those were not unlikely outcomes. Those were legitimate fears that they had. But Clare, though she was sick and she was physically weak, she got up and she instructed her sisters to carry her to the entrance of the convent where the attackers could be seen and they could also see her. She took with her the convent's monstrance. Now if you're not familiar with what a monstrance is, in the Catholic tradition it's a vessel that is used to hold the consecrated elements of Holy Communion so people can come and gaze upon them, can look at them, can sit and pray. So she comes bearing the elements of Holy Communion, and she prayed aloud in sight of the enemy where she could see them and they could see her. She's reported to have prayed, "Lord, protect these women whom I cannot protect." And according to the story, she heard a voice saying, "I will always protect you." And so there she is, unarmed with nothing but prayer and with the elements of Communion. She prays, she lifts them up, and she waits. And the attackers, for reasons unexplained, turned away without entering, and the convent was spared. Now, whether that particular story is entirely historical or partially legendary, which it very well might be, the story does reflect how Clare went out to face violence, prepared not to return violence in kind, but to recognize that the presence of God called her to a different path – one of prayer and presence and trust in God to protect the vulnerable. As she held up those Eucharistic elements, those elements of Holy

Communion, they were not just a symbol of comfort for Clare and for the sisters, but they were also a source of radical, non-violent resistance to the violence that was right there in front of them.

I love these two stories of Francis and Clare. They were real people, and they lived in real times of violence and in the elevation of holy war, and they chose to act and respond differently than those around them. I can't help but wonder, in light of the constant and current news cycle, how Francis and Clare might respond today if they were here with us now. What might they say? What might they do? I think their response would embody that same radical commitment to peace and nonviolence and solidarity with the poor and the oppressed that defined their lives a thousand years ago. I think they would publicly denounce the use of violence. Francis said, "All who love the Lord with their whole heart must also love their enemies and do good to them." I mean, that's the scripture passage we heard this morning in the Sermon on the Mount. Those passages are central to the lives of Francis and Clare. "All who love the Lord with their whole heart must also love their enemies and do good to them." Just as they resisted and condemned the violence of empire in their day, I think they would condemn the violence that exists in our world today – the ways in which we as a country are participating in war and in genocide – they likely would have condemned them as acts of imperial aggression. Francis, he walked unarmed into war zones. Clare faced attackers with only prayers. Neither of them would bless missiles and bombs. I think they would also call the church to repentance. Clare and Francis were not afraid to critique the church when it was too aligned with political or with military power. I imagine that if they lived today, they would call on leaders to resist these actions, to resist holy war mentality, and to reclaim Jesus' way of peace. Francis' radical embrace of the poor would challenge any theology that justifies violence in the name of God. I think they would also mourn with the victims of violence, no matter who they are. They would refuse to see anyone as an enemy. I think they would choose the radical presence of Jesus over any type of partisan loyalty. They wouldn't choose sides in political debates, but they wouldn't stay silent either. Their allegiance would always be to the suffering Christ in the suffering world, which would compel them to speak out when there is violence no matter who authorized it. I think they would offer an alternative vision of the world for us to embody as well. They would remind us that peace isn't just the absence of war, but it's the presence of justice and humility and a shared life. I think they would urge us today to feed the hungry, to build relationships across boundaries, not to build walls or to drop bombs, and to witness Christ's kingdom, not national power or political power. Francis and Clare give us a different vision than the one that is playing out in the world around us. What does that look like for us? I wish that I had a better answer or any answer at all. What I do know is that both Francis and Clare took seriously the words and the work of Jesus Christ, especially those that we heard this morning about loving our enemies and blessing those who do harm, about not storing up treasures for ourselves here on earth, but storing them up in heaven, about living peaceably, about living as people of the kingdom of God. Where is Christ today in the rubble? Who will feed and comfort the grieving? And how can we live the gospel of peace with everything that we are, even or especially when it's dangerous? Today, may we look to Francis and Clare as people, real people who have gone

before us and shown us another way. May we imitate them as they have imitated Jesus Christ. Amen.