

Walking to Assisi

January 2019

For much of my life, I have wanted to go on a walking tour. For the past 30 years, in ministry, I have been confined a lot to my desk, my town, my people, serving local churches to the best of my ability. Last August, Sharon and I began our empty nest. Our youngest child, Maureen, went off to college in Santa Barbara, Cal. I planned my sabbatical this past fall to coincide with the beginning of this new phase in our family life. It was a perfect time to bust out of town and go on a walking tour. After looking at numerous possibilities all around the world, one particular tour caught our eye; a hike through the Umbria mountains of Italy, following in the footsteps of Saint Francis, ending in the city of Assisi. It was a pilgrimage calling our names.

For the past 22 years, I have worked for Frontier Fellowship, formerly Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, a Protestant mission order, dedicated to helping American churches engage in what Christ is doing worldwide to reach the remaining unreached people groups of our world. Frontier Fellowship began in 1981 when an increasing number of Presbyterians were feeling a need to create a mission organization that would keep the flame of frontier mission alive in our denomination. As a mission order, Frontier Fellowship has raised its own funds, governed itself apart from the ruling bodies of the Presbyterian Church, and has urged its members to live a simple lifestyle, following in the footsteps of Jesus and his Great Commission. Francis of Assisi also began his own mission order, apart from the governing bodies of the Church in Rome at the time. His objective, too, was to reach the whole world with the Good News of Christ. For this reason, and many others, Francis has always been one of my heroes in the faith.

In late September, Sharon and I joined a group of 15 people organized by ATG-Oxford walking tours. We were the only Americans in the group. The rest were either British or from Singapore; a cross-cultural experience we loved very much. We began our week-long walking tour in the town of Spoleto, and from there we walked approximately 12 miles each day along the ridges of the Umbria mountains, often walking on the very paths Francis and his followers trod in the 13th Century. During the beautiful, blue-skied walks each day, I began to think about the Apostle Paul and the hundreds of miles he and his companions walked through the mountains of Greece and Turkey as he wrote many of his epistles now in our New Testament. I felt wonderfully convicted that I needed to do more walking and hiking in my life as a way to allow the Holy Spirit to talk to me and instruct me in his ways. There is something cleansing and faith-building walking prayerfully and often outside in the beautiful air of God's creation. Francis himself fell deeply in love with God's creation and its creatures. Each day during our hike, we would stop for a picnic lunch, lie on the grass, and gather our strength. Often, someone would read aloud from one of Francis's writings. "The Canticle of Brother Sun" was one of our favorites:

*"Most High, omnipotent, good Lord,
To You praise, glory, and honor and all benediction.
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
And there is no one worthy to mention You.
Praised be my Lord,
by means of all Your creatures,
and most especially by Sir Brother Sun,
Who makes the day, and illumines us by his light:*

*For he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor:
And is a symbol of You, God most High.
Praised be my Lord,
by means of Sister Moon and all the stars:
For in heaven You have placed them,
clear, precious and fair..."*

Saint Francis was born into a well-to-do merchant family. He could have easily continued in the family business of producing and trading fine clothing and he could have remained with his exploits of being a chivalrous soldier on horseback, defending his town of Assisi. God, however, grabbed hold of him in a mighty way and challenged him to sell all his possessions and lead a life of total dependency on the Lord's daily provisions. Francis was a radical. Initially, he lived in the woods with only one tunic for clothing. Soon, he found himself surrounded by followers who wanted the same life for themselves. This handful of dedicated men eventually went into the nearby mountains and lived and worshipped in caves. Over time, they began a movement that sent missionaries to nearly every corner of the world, caring for the most marginalized and poorest people of each region. Even the Pope in Rome at the time recognized the unparalleled devotion of Francis and his followers, granting them unprecedented ecclesiastical status as a recognized mission order of the Roman Church. It is amazing to consider what God can do with a life totally dedicated to surrendering, following, trusting, and obeying his son, Jesus Christ. It can remind us of the instructions Jesus gave his followers when he sent them into the countryside to preach the Good News.



St. Francis of Assisi

"Heal the sick, raise the dead, cure those with leprosy, and cast out demons. Give as freely as you have received! Don't take any money in your money belts – no gold, silver, or even copper coins. Don't carry a traveler's bag with a change of clothes and sandals or even a walking stick. Don't hesitate to accept hospitality, because those who work deserve to be fed." (Matthew 10:8-10)

Another reason I admire Saint Francis was the courage he displayed during one of the darkest periods in Christian history, the Crusades. During the Fifth Crusade, in 1221, the armies of the Vatican not only sent troops to Jerusalem to liberate it from Muslim control; it also sent battalions to northern Egypt to confront strategic strongholds of Muslim troops in the Arab world. These were bloody battles, one major world religion pitted against the other, vying for control of Jerusalem and its surrounding areas. The Crusades saddened Francis greatly. He could not find anything in the teachings of Jesus that supported either military battles or the need to control segments of land on earth.

Therefore, he and a few other Franciscan brothers traveled all the way down from Italy to northern Egypt, hoping to meet personally with the Islamic leader of the area, Sultan Malik al-Kamil. Francis hoped to have a peaceful conversation with the Sultan and urge both sides of the conflict to cease their bloody battles. Amazingly, once Francis reached the battlefield area, he waded across the river that separated the troops and walked untouched into the Muslim camp. He spent two weeks talking with the Sultan, explaining the teachings of Jesus while appealing to the more peaceful teachings of the Quran. Apparently, he and the Sultan grew to be friends with great respect for one another. Unfortunately, though, the battles continued for another half year. Eventually, the Crusader troops lost their attempt to take control of northern Egypt and went back to Italy. But, Francis's peaceful conversation with the Sultan remains indelible in Christian history.



Meeting Between St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Al-Kamil, in Damietta

When Jesus said, we need to "love our neighbors as ourselves," even to the point of "loving our enemies," Francis took him at his word. Francis was not so much a radical as he was simply an obedient follower of Christ with a child-like faith, something to which we should all aspire. Francis was a forerunner to both the Renaissance and the Reformation, encouraging Christians to love and appreciate God's creation and strive to keep the Church pure from self-indulgence and sin. He was calling his Church to task on many levels. As Francis knew so well, if the Church is not careful, it can become more of a religious institution, encrusted with tendencies of self-preservation, rather than a living, breathing, loving Body of Christ.

Francis not only believed in the power of prayer, but also in the power of peaceful dialogue. In the world we live in today, what could be more important than Christians recapturing this vital role we need to play in our society, helping people of different points of view dialogue and have conversation in a peaceful and respectful manner? Christians today need to be careful not to be lured into belligerent attitudes and even confrontational hostilities toward opposing points of view. Those are not attitudes Jesus had in mind when he said during his Sermon on the Mount, "God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

In my own work among Muslims in the Chicago area, or in the Middle East, along with the preaching and teaching I do for Frontier Fellowship, I try to keep the following words of Saint Francis in mind:

*"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
and where there is sadness, joy.
Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love:
For it is in giving that we receive.*

*It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."*

Sharon and I eventually made it to Assisi along with the rest of our group. We spent the final day worshiping at the Basilica of St. Francis where he was laid to rest. Though that particular pilgrimage ended, our pilgrimage through life with Jesus continues. We pray that this New Year will be special for you and your families, and that God will make each one of us instruments of his peace.



Assisi, Umbria, Italy