

No Longer Two But One

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Trinity Church Boston
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Lectionary: Mark 10:2-16

St Francis Sunday and the Blessings of the Animals

There are common perceptions about church buildings. Perhaps, most prominent is that a church building is a sacred space. For many in the world, bringing animals into a sacred space goes against this common perception.

Believe it or not, I ran into the same clash of perceptions when I wrote my book, *Desmond Tutu: the Spiritual Biography of South Africa's Confessor*,¹ I gathered up the courage to defy the common perceptions of Tutu as a politician. For some, this was controversial. Instead of a politician, I describe him as a mystic. I went further into controversy by describing Tutu as a saint.

What causes these troubled waters?

For quite a long time now, due to a Eurocentric focus, Christianity is divided into three parts: Roman Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox. The perception of needing saints is commonly understood among Catholics and Orthodox but not among Protestants, who seem to focus on God through faith and grace. With a focus on saints, many Protestants believe, we usually end up in dysfunctional hierarchies in which some are better than others. For many protestants, such dysfunctional hierarchies end up being problems like, Christian Nationalisms and achievement-oriented kinds of salvation.

If you adhere to the recent Oscar and Emmy awards, you would indeed have to concur with such dysfunction and pathological salvation. Such Academy Award winners include *Spotlight* which tells the true story of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Boston Globe investigation of a decades-long Roman Catholic cover-up at the highest levels, tracing the steps to one of the biggest crime stories in modern times. And movie director Edward Berger, who recently won the academy award for his film, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, is expected to win again with his new movie, *Conclave*, about to be released on 15 November, which follows one of the world's most secretive and ancient events – selecting a new Pope.

Why does all of this also get us in trouble?

¹ Michael Battle, *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography of South Africa's Confessor* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press), 2021.

We get in trouble because of the debates of the European reformation. The problem for us Anglican Episcopalians, is that we are known to constitute Roman Catholic, Protestant and even Eastern Orthodox sensibilities. We are not one or the other. In our amphibious nature as a church, we also believe in saints—on this day, Francis of Assisi in particular. Our trouble, in other words, is in why we name Tutu and Francis saints when we're seemingly not Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

Here's my answer: **I believe in Christian mysticism.**

Mysticism defined by St Francis is not a fake and distant realm available only to elite contemplatives. A church building for Francis should not only welcome who we think belong here. Also, to allay the fears of Protestants, Francis does not believe he can work his way to heaven. For Francis, the Christian life is the incessant experiential invitation to become one with God, each other and creation. He believes that our furry friends want the same as us—to be one with God, us and creation. So, Francis has a summit meeting with the birds of air to become united with them. And Francis kisses the hand of the leper, not because of the optics of garnering public attention to appear somehow holier than anyone else. Nor does Francis meet with the birds of the air and kiss the hand of the leper to get the support of the Roman Cardinals (not the birds, the people). He kisses the diseased hand not to manufacture a miracle in order to be a saint. He prays, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace," not in order to be considered the next Pope—no, he meets with the birds of the air because he seeks to meet God. He kisses the diseased hand in the attempt to kiss God.

Francis did not want to be a bishop, cardinal or pope. Given Francis' biography, if you suggested such a thing to Francis—that is, I think you should be considered the next Pope—no doubt he would laugh, a deep belly laugh. It would be one of those laughs that is so robust that you cannot distinguish between laughing and crying. Of course, we laugh with him knowing the irony that the current pope is named Francis.

Speaking of laughter, and the capacity of the church to both sacred and ordinary, I received an email in 2003 which read:

Father Battle, John and I laughed out loud at a few of these. These sentences actually appeared in church bulletins or were announced in church services. Thought we could share them with you:

1. Announcement in a church bulletin for a national PRAYER & FASTING Conference: "The cost for attending the Fasting & Prayer Conference includes meals."
2. Announcement, "The sermon this morning: 'Jesus Walks on the Water.' The sermon tonight: 'Searching for Jesus.'"

3. Announcement, “Our youth basketball team is back in action Wednesday at 8 PM in the recreation hall. Come out and watch us kill Christ the King.”
4. Announcement, “Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Don't forget your husbands.”
5. Announcement, “The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been cancelled due to a conflict.”
6. Announcement, “Miss Charlene Mason sang the hymn ‘I will not pass this way again,’ giving obvious pleasure to the congregation.
7. Announcement, “Don't let worry kill you off - let the Church help.”

St. Francis loved to laugh; and so, his laughter was infectious. Those around him were infected by his joy of finding access to God in the strangest places. So, Francis kisses the hand of the leper. Here is why Francis should be seen as a saint. He is a saint not because he does something most of us would be repulsed by but because he was seeking God beyond his capacity to know God. This might sound trite or like some kind of irrelevant philosophical argument, but such desire to know God beyond our capacity of knowing is a sign of faith that we ultimately need God's help to know God. . . it is the sign that no one can be a Christian alone. Gregory Orr puts it best as he provides this mystical explanation of what happens in a kiss:

As with lovers,
When it's right, you can't say
Who is kissing whom²

Those who do not understand such mysticism, have a hard time with Jesus who constantly takes us beyond our capacity of knowing. The pharisees approach Jesus in a finite and contentious way of knowing, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” It really wasn't a question; rather it was a test for Jesus to fail. So, Jesus expands the context of the question. No longer is the male identity the central focus. The bride does not leave in pursuit of the bridegroom; rather, the bridegroom leaves in pursuit of the bride.

Jesus answers, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

“So they are no longer two, but one flesh.”

² Gregory Orr, *Concerning the Book that is the Body of the Beloved*, (Port Townsend, Wash.” Copper Canyon, 2012, p.29

No longer two but one. This is the definition of mysticism. This takes us back to the mystical explanation of what happens in a kiss:

As with lovers,
When it's right, you can't say
Who is kissing whom

It is significant how the incarnation, in which God became human so that we could become like God, sheds light on Christian mysticism. The incarnation mimics how Jesus moves us beyond our human capacities. Christ, the bridegroom pursues the bride, the church. In each is the other. Both identities constitute the name "bride". It is the kind of illumination in which Jesus entangles our human identity with the divine **from the very beginning of creation**.

When Francis kisses the leper, he is not trying to show off that he is a saint; rather, he is kissing God through God's good creation. Francis moves away from dualistic thinking of seeing everything as good or bad, me against you, and us against them. He teaches us to contemplate where God might be beyond what we could even imagine.