

**MIKE AND TOM: TWO MEN IN CHAIRS; JEREMIAH 31:31-34; 10.16.16;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC**

Tom – Mike I want to thank you for being our co-chair for our Generosity 2017 Campaign and helping us identify our theme: The Prayer of St. Francis.

Mike – Tom, for some background, can you tell us about St. Francis, the man?

Tom – St. Francis is, hands-down, the best known, most widely followed of all the saints. He lived in the 13th century, one of seven children of a wealthy silk merchant; pursued the life of a playboy, active in sports, enjoyed partying.

A turning point came when he went to war and was taken captive for a year; when he returned home, he began to reconsider and turn away from his privileged life.

Increasingly, he noticed the poor and sick; he made a pilgrimage to Rome and joined them one day at St. Peter's begging for alms. After returning to Assisi he grew ill and his illness deepened his spiritual discernment. Francis had a vision of Christ calling him to repair the church. After he recovered legend says he was conducting a business deal at his father's store when a beggar approached and asked for alms, by the time Francis concluded the deal the beggar was gone. Francis ran after him and gave him everything he had in his pockets to the beggar. His friends chided him for his foolish generosity and his father, infuriated, cursed and beat him. Francis then knew he was called to serve the poor; he gave up his inheritance and gave away everything he owned.

He became a street person, preaching the gospel and attracted followers; his rule of faith and life was simple "walk in the footsteps of Christ." In 1210, the Pope established what we know today as the Order of St. Francis – devoted to living like Christ in poverty. His mission was to nurse the sick, especially lepers who were regarded as most repulsive; he also spent time in nature preaching to the animals whom he called his brothers and sisters; it is said birds would flock to the trees wherever he was and remain still, entranced by his voice. He called the sun his brother and the moon his sister.

The prayer attributed to him was written only about a hundred years ago. In the 1920s, a priest printed what we call the Prayer of St. Francis on the back of a card with a picture of Francis on the other side. But the prayer perfectly fits the life and character of St. Francis. So in the truest sense it is his prayer.

Tom – Mike, why did you suggest we use his prayer for our 2017 Giving Campaign?

Mike – I can think of no better prayer as a basis for the theme of our giving

campaign. I have gotten to know this prayer over the years and found its guidance to be invaluable. The prayer has a way of clearing your mind when you say it, "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace..." and it enables you to focus on what, finally, is all that matters – being a force or agent for good in the world. In a sense, that's what our giving campaign is about. Taking what we as a society value above all else – the dollar – and focusing our use of it for accomplishing good in our community.

Tom – That's wonderful insight Mike. I've heard you talk about a way of understanding the two parts of this prayer. Can you tell us about that?

Mike – Well, the prayer does have two distinct parts. The first section petitions God to help us to be instruments of his peace by bringing love in the face of hatred, faith where there is doubt, hope over despair, to bring joy where there is sadness. The prayer catalogs what seems so wrong in the world and keeps our response to the burdens and problems of the world clear and simple and focused. No one can singlehandedly overcome the world's doubt or despair or sadness but anyone can resolve to meet these things as they confront us in an ordinary day with faith, hope and joy. These are ambitious aspirations. Certainly we need the grace of God to bring these qualities into the world.

However, in the prayer's second passage, we have specific concepts that are entirely within our control, on which we can take concrete action. "Lord, grant that I may seek to comfort rather than be comforted; to understand than to be understood; to love than to be loved." Love, comfort and understanding. You don't need in depth theological training to know how to love, comfort and understand. We come equipped, as human beings, to do these things; they are the spark of the divine or image of God within us all. We become fully human when we live out in specific relationships and circumstances what it means to love, comfort, and understand. The entire thrust of the Prayer of St. Francis is 'to give' of ourselves. Therefore, the word "give" is relevant to our campaign especially since we are asking all of us to give not just talent and time but also dollars.

Tom – That's really a helpful way of looking at the prayer. Tell us how you 'live' this prayer on a daily basis?

Mike – Well it can be a challenge, because we all naturally want to be loved and comforted and for others to understand things from our point of view. But we can remind ourselves, every time we engage in a human encounter, that it is better to love, comfort and understand than to be loved, comforted and understood. We may find ourselves resisting actions that love, comfort and seek understanding but that 's where the battle lays. There are plenty of voices and circumstances in the world that tell us to hate, punish or reject. But if we practice and persist, in seeking to love, comfort and understand, I

have found that it becomes almost automatic, second nature. And like other wonders in God's world, when we apply this approach with others, we discover a great paradox – we are in turn loved, comforted and understood beyond our expectations.

Tom – That's powerful stuff Mike, you just named the secret of spiritual fulfillment and abundant life; you really do understand the prayer from experience.

Mike – It's easier said than done. We have to constantly remind ourselves and each other of these simple tenets.

Tom – That's where community comes in and using this prayer as a church. As I think about it, Francis embodies our Presbyterian principles; his goal was to live a life of service to those in need and live frugally like a good Scotsman. He was a lay person who never chose to be ordained; he spent his time *in the world* just as Calvin urged, rather than retreating from it; and he was a lover of nature – as were our Celtic ancestors.

You know, it's true we are drawn to our faith more by attraction than persuasion. An inspiring life, like Francis's, will have more impact growing and sustaining a vital church than a scholarly debate or argument. Mentors are more effective than theological arguments. That's why many churches identify with and name themselves after the apostles and saints.

I like the idea of adopting Francis and his prayer for our giving campaign; it says we as a community, not just as individuals, but as a church, aspire to live like Francis. The whole thrust of the prayer is outward, toward those in need, those who struggle, without looking for anything in return. That's a good description of Westminster's mission over the years.

But like you also said it's a way of seeing the world we need to reclaim again and again. The world is complex and distracting; living like Francis or Jesus takes the support of others, of a community.

And specifically the understanding and support of others who are on that same path. The Christian faith never worked as a solo venture but in communities of people; where there is mentoring and support from friends and peers who are committed to the same values.

Mike – What do you think that would look like for us here at Westminster?

Tom – What we are asking all of us to do this morning is to try an experiment; we are all at different stages in our spiritual life; we subscribe to a range of theological orientations which is what makes this congregation open and interesting; but what we are proposing this morning is not just a sermon to listen to but something for us all to take away, a collective effort – We are

inviting all of us to embrace the prayer of St. Francis as a community by each dedicating ourselves to intentionally live the prayer over the coming weeks. I don't think anyone would object to the request to be more loving, comforting and understanding; what makes this request hard are the myriad distractions we face each day in our over-scheduled lives and the culture at large which tells us to climb the ladder, to make sure our kids have everything, and pretending our lives are or have to be perfect with the facades we present from facebook to facing the world each day.

Francis reminds us – opposite of the world's message – that it isn't all about me. Abundant life comes from giving ourselves away. The best way to keep our faith, the bible says, is to give it away. The best way to experience love, comfort and understanding is to love, comfort and understand others. We heard Jeremiah this morning: this is a spiritual law written upon our hearts.

What would happen if this congregation pledged to live this prayer in our individual lives and support each other doing it. I guarantee something special would happen; we'd widen our ministry, touch more lives.

Mike – As I look back at our history, at the history of any group of people at their best – this city, our nation, my alma mater – it was when people worked together, despite their differences, that they accomplished great things.

Tom – So true Mike, all we have to worry about is how can we be the best church we can be – not how can we raise money or pack in new members or keep this building in good repair; no, all we have to worry about is loving, comforting and understanding others and everything else, all those other things – so important to a healthy church – will fall into place. When the church is the church it is a powerfully attractive force for good. But when the church tries to be a fund-raising agency or social club or marketing firm it loses its way.

Follow in the footsteps of Jesus was Francis one and only rule for living. The proof is in the pudding. His prayer put into practice satisfies our deepest spiritual hunger.

Mike – So we're asking all of you to apply this simple approach to your life during the coming weeks. To some it may come naturally, but for others, like me, we'll need reminders – then all it takes is to reset. Let's give it a try!

Tom – Seems like a reasonable request for a church.