

October 4, 2026
Matthew 11:25-30

St. Francis of Assisi, Renewer of the Church
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Come to Me”

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

When it was announced in 2013 that Pope Benedict XVI had decided to retire, it sent shock waves across the Roman Catholic Church and throughout the world. While it is not unusual for clergy – including Roman Catholic priests – to retire at a certain age, no pope had retired from the papacy in over six hundred years. Popes had traditionally died in office, even if like Pope John Paul II they had become infirmed; but Benedict had decided that his physical health made him unable to continue to fulfill the demands of his office, so he would retire and allow another person to be elected the leader of his church. In the ensuing conclave, the College of Cardinals elected Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina to succeed Benedict on the Throne of St. Peter. Following Roman Catholic tradition, Bergoglio was asked what papal name he would take; newly elected popes often took the names of previous popes such as John XXIII, Paul VI, and Benedict XVI. But Bergoglio surprised everyone when he announced that he would be known as Pope Francis, the first pope to take the name of the beloved St. Francis of Assisi. Shortly after his election, Pope Francis was asked why he chose this unique name. In his answer, he referred to the words of a fellow cardinal who after his election *“hugged me, kissed me and said, ‘Don’t forget the poor.’”* The new pope took these words to heart and chose to be called after St. Francis, *“the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation ... How I would like a church that is poor and that is for the poor.”*

St. Francis of Assisi is one of the most venerated figures in Christianity and a beloved saint known for his concern for the poor and his love of creation. Born into a wealthy family in 12th Century Assisi, Italy, he was inspired toward a life of poverty and religious devotion as a young man and began to repair chapels and care for the poor in his hometown. Francis soon gathered a band of followers who joined in his lifestyle and received approval from Pope Innocent III to organize the Order of Friars Minor, commonly known as the Franciscan Order, which is still one of the major monastic orders in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches to this day. Francis died in 1226 at the age of forty-four and was canonized by Pope Gregory IX in 1228.

Francis is associated with the patronage of animals and the environment and, along with Catherine of Siena, is patron saint of Italy.

- “St. Francis showed us the importance of our humanity and embracing our humanity, our sense of relatedness, our sense of being brother and sister together with all the created reality. By embracing our humanity and our social and ecological relatedness, that is how we respond to God’s love.” – Brother Keith Warner, OFM

On this day when we celebrate the life and legacy of St. Francis of Assisi, we hear our Lord Jesus Christ calling us to follow him in a way of life that is radically different from the ways and expectations of the world in which we live. Despite rejection that he had experienced in the previous verses in Matthew’s Gospel, some persons had accepted Jesus’ mission and message, and for this he gives thanks: *“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”* (Matthew 11:25-26). This is one of only three times in Matthew in which we hear Jesus speaking intimately with the “Father” (*abba*), the other times being at the Last Supper and in the Garden of Gethsemane:

- “I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when it is new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” – 26:29.
- “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” – 26:39.

Using the form of a Jewish prayer of thanksgiving, Jesus praises God the Father as the “*Lord of heaven and earth*” for the favours that God has bestowed upon God’s people (“*Tobias parted from Raguel with happiness and joy, praising the Lord of heaven and earth, King over all, because he had made his journey a success.*” – Tobit 10:13). The identity of Jesus as the one who speaks for the Father, though concealed from the wise and learned of his day, has been revealed to Jesus’ followers, whose open acceptance of him shows them to be childlike in their receptivity to the gospel (“*Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*” – 18:4). Those who recognize Jesus as the divine messenger do so not on the basis of superior religious status or individual intelligence or shrewdness, but by revelation, and the gift from God to those who are open and unpretentious. The “little children” are the ones to whom the divine revelation is given as sheer grace (“*So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*” – 18:14).

- “Thus you will find the divine wisdom that God presents in the Bible in a manner so simple that it damps the pride of clever people and brings it to nothing. In this book you find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel directs the shepherds. Those swaddling clothes are shabby and poor, yet precious is the treasure wrapped in them, for it is Christ.” – Martin Luther, *Table Talk*.

This contrast continues as Jesus speaks of the knowledge delivered to him directly from the Father in contrast to the scribes and rabbis, whose tradition is on the human level alone: “*All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*” (11:27). It is the divine initiative of the Father who has given “all things” to the Son, which Jesus will reiterate to the disciples in his final appearance to them (“*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (28:18-19). Jesus possesses teaching authority that ranks him above Moses, as he demonstrates in his commentary on the Torah in the Sermon on the Mount (“*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*” – 5:17); he displays healing authority to cure sickness and to cast out demons (“*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*” – 4:23); and he is vested with spiritual authority to forgive the sins of others (“*But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*” – he then said to the paralytic – “*Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.*” – 9:6). Disciples can come to know the Father through the Son, by the grace of divine revelation, but the Son knows the Father in a unique way.

Jesus now turns his attention to those who have accepted his message and see in him the one who has the “words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Speaking as the embodiment of divine wisdom, Jesus’ invitation extends to all who are burdened: “*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*” (11:28). While Jesus is aware of the physical burdens that many of his followers have to carry in their daily lives, he has in mind particularly the burden of religious obligation imposed by the scribes and Pharisees, which Jesus understands as a barrier to communion with God (“*They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.*” – 23:4). The benefit of answering Jesus’ call is spiritual rest, a promise of inner peace that quiets the mind and surpasses human understanding (“*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your*

minds in Christ Jesus.” – Philippians 4:7). The saying has had a long life in the history of the church as a more general invitation to all who are put off by the pretensions of human religion and are attracted to the “Way of St. Francis” in his example of following Jesus’ invitation to a life of simplicity and service:

- “The ‘Way of St. Francis’ isn’t a single medieval road but a constellation of routes that connect the places of his life and message. Walking them today means following, step by step, his human and spiritual legacy – at your own pace, in your own way. It doesn’t require religious motives; many walkers choose it to connect with the energy of the landscapes, to reconnect with nature, to discover the ‘green heart of Italy,’ and to welcome a gentler tempo of life.” – Ottavia Mapelli.

Jesus’ invitation should not be misinterpreted as a life of leisure free of any burdens or obligations, for it is a call to a life of discipleship that entails taking on the yoke of our Lord: *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (11:29-30). In the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, “yoke” was a common metaphor for servitude and obedience. It often referred to the “yoke of the Torah” that defined what it means to live in a covenant relationship with the Lord (*“Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?”* – Acts 15:10). In other places, “yoke” represents the counsel of divine Wisdom that guides men and women toward pious and prosperous living (*“Put your neck under her yoke and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by.”* – Sirach 51:26). While Jesus makes use of this familiar imagery, there is a significant difference in the yoke of which he speaks: while other biblical passages refer to “the yoke,” Jesus speaks of “my yoke,” thereby claiming to be the expression of God’s Will. Jesus is *“the living embodiment of the new Torah for the people of God and the incarnation of divine wisdom for all who seek spiritual fulfillment and rest.”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). Like rest, the “easy” yoke of Jesus is not an invitation to a life of ease, but deliverance from the artificial burdens of human religion which is often seen as a barrier to the true fellowship of the kingdom of God. Jesus offers rest as the Lord offered rest to Moses (*“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”* – Exodus 33:14), which is synonymous with the salvation that is associated with the Kingdom of God and eternal life. Jesus is the giver of sabbath rest and all it implies; disciples are called to learn from Jesus not only by heeding his words but by imitating his life. Discipleship is not effortless, but neither is it an exhausting burden.

- “What would it be like to take Jesus’ yoke, to find our life inside Christ’s own connection to God and purpose in the world? When we return to trust and alignment with Christ, the result is rest. Nor just metaphorical rest, actual rest. *You will find rest for your souls.* If our faith requires constant striving and insistent measuring, if we’re never good enough, always needing to do more or be more, it is not the faith of Christ.” – Kara K. Root.

In four weeks, the church will observe All Saints Day (November 1 falls on a Sunday this year). It is a day when we honour “*all the saints who from their labours rest,*” from saints like Francis of Assisi who have been beloved by generations of Christians to saints whose names have been lost in the sands of time. Saints are not necessarily persons whose lives are so exemplary that they bear no resemblance to the reality of human existence or the presence of sin within our lives; in most cases, saints are as flawed and imperfect as any other person. To be a “saint” is not to have accomplished some superhuman feat of holiness and righteousness; a “saint” is a person who has been claimed by God in the waters of baptism and who has devoted themselves to trusting in God and taking on the yoke of Christ that lifts the burden of striving and accomplishment off our shoulders as it places upon us the responsibility to love and serve all people following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not the promise of a life free of danger or persecution; Jesus warns his disciples that it is possible that “*you will be hated by all because of my name*” (10:27). But even if they face such challenges disciples of Christ need never worry nor fear, for they have the assurance that the one who has placed the yoke of Christ upon them is the one who will lead them to the eternal home where the burdens of fear, doubt, suffering, and even death will be no more; for we have the promise that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (Romans 6:5).

- “To be a saint is to be human because we were created to be human. To be a saint is to live with courage and self-restraint ... To be a saint is to live not with hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full.” – Frederick Buechner.

While most people do not, like the popes, take on the name of a saint who has been an example of faith in their lives, all of us bear the name of the one who through baptism calls us to be his disciples and shine his light before others. When we are baptized, we are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and therefore dedicate ourselves to follow in his example. As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, “*in*

Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27). The Apostle spells out what it means to be “clothed in Christ” in his letter to the Colossians where he proclaims that *“as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ... Above all, clothe yourselves in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”* (Colossians 3:12-14). As a yoke is put on one’s back so that they might serve the one who has yoked them, the clothes of Christ that are placed upon our shoulders are for the purpose of being the body of Christ sent out into the world to be instruments of God’s gracious peace and steadfast love. In the words of Francis’ famous prayer, we are to be the instruments that will bring the blessings of God into a world that yearns for an alternative to the darkness and despair that so afflicts it:

- “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; where there is sadness, joy. O 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. Amen.”

When I prepare myself to lead worship, the last item of clothing I put on is my stole, the visible symbol of my call as a minister of Word and Sacrament. The stole is modeled after the yoke and is first placed upon a pastor’s shoulders by the bishop who represents the church in entrusting this office to the person being set apart for this office. When I place this over my shoulders, I am reminded of Jesus’ words to *“take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”* It is a reminder that my task is to fulfill the will of our Lord in proclaiming Christ’s liberating word, to offer an alternative word of life and hope in a world filled with death and despair. While few of us practice placing such a physical yoke upon our shoulders, all of us are called to take the yoke of Christ as disciples of our Lord, to follow the example of Francis of Assisi in being instruments of the peace of Christ which passes all understanding, and to accept the invitation of our Saviour to “come to me” so that we might experience the rest, the hope, and the life that are ours because of those who came to us as instruments of the *“peace of God which passes all understanding, which will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

Amen.