

What Does St. Francis Mean To Me?

When Mark approached me to deliver the stewardship reflection, my first thought was that it must have been an error. He must have meant to ask my wife, Dawn. Dawn is in charge of all the spiritual and altruistic matters in our household. I am more of a handle-the-finances and cut-the-grass sort of guy.

My second thought was flattery, as I have never felt like I was part of a church in my adult life. I was raised Catholic, received all the sacraments, went to a Catholic High School and a Jesuit University. I learned about the history of the church and did a fair share of Bible study for classes. But religion never really resonated with me beyond being a great historical story. The Holy Spirit was an elusive concept to me. I would go through the motions of going to church but eventually stopped attending as I was not getting anything out of it.

But something changed. I went from being a non-practicing Catholic to a St Francis parishioner who attends services regularly and finds meaning in both the messages and the people. I had to figure out how this happened and I attribute it to three reasons:

1. The sermons

The St Francis sermons are like nothing I have heard. Mark and Debra do a tremendous job of taking the gospel and distilling it into messages that I can understand and are relevant to my life.

The sermons are both challenging and affirming. I hear the teachings and I think, "This is great! I need to incorporate this into my life." The challenge is to turn the sermons from a listening exercise into an active exercise, and I often fall short.

The affirming part of the sermons is that they are not delivered as an ultimatum. There is no eternal damnation or threat of not receiving communion. Instead, they are delivered in an inviting way that says that you are not in this alone. God is actively helping us, and we are imperfectly human and will make mistakes.

I can tell the sermons have an impact on me because they have become internal and external mantras to me. Some of my favorites are:

- You matter
- You are enough
- We are all on our own journey (and on this journey we need to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us)
- You might be the only Jesus someone may see

2. The eucharistic prayer

We break this bread for those who journey the way of Sikhs and Hindus, for those who follow the path of the Buddha, for our sisters and brothers of Islam, for the Jewish people from whom we come, and for all who walk the way of faith.

The first time I heard this prayer I was blown away.

At the height of the service, we recognize everyone. What an amazing statement of inclusiveness and humility. Usually people are vying to be the best or the chosen ones. To take a step back and honor our differences, instead of condemning them, is a great sentiment to bring into everyday life.

3. The congregation

The people of St Francis are extremely welcoming. When you start to get to know them and hear their stories, you realize that this is a very accomplished, interesting, and quirky group of people. The congregation is small but is like a Swiss army knife. This group comes together to provide any skill that is required or perform any task that needs to be done.

I am also struck by the genuine care shown by the parish to others. When people ask me what the church is like, I tell them about the Road Race fundraiser. A lot of planning, coordination, and labor is undertaken by the St Francis parishioners and then the profits from that work are given away to another organization. What other church does that? It is just one example of how St. Francis is generous with its time and resources.

These are the things about St. Francis that have led to me standing here today. I thank the clergy and the congregation for getting me to this point on my journey. As the next step for me, I am involved in the Reimagining Church initiative with the Yale Divinity School. So far it has been an honor to work with the St. Francis team. I am hoping to contribute what I have learned on my journey so we can get more people to engage and grow with the church as I have.