

**Josh Mangelson 00:17**

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

**Carla Long 00:33**

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and today you're listening to Percolating on Faith. But not just Percolating on Faith. You're listening to a small subset we're doing from Percolating on Faith where we talk all about mystics. And if you don't know what a mystic is, you need to hop back a couple episodes in Percolating on Faith and learn from Tony and Charmaine about what a mystic is. Today we're going to be talking to a dear and wonderful friend of mine, Laurie Gordon. Hi, Laurie.

**Laurie Gordon 01:00**

Hi, Carla. Good to see you again.

**Carla Long 01:03**

It's so good to be with you again. Laurie and I are old friends back when we both used to live in California. And we were Cali girls. Right, Laurie? Tot, we were totally Cali girls. (Born and raised.) Born and raised in California. And she is going to be talking about Francis, uh, Francis of Assisi. And I, I'm really excited about learning more about him. Um, but before we jump into that, Laurie, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**Laurie Gordon 01:27**

Oh, well, um, I am California born and bred. Um, I live in Bend, Oregon now. I have been doing spiritual formation work pretty much through my whole life, um, my whole church life. At the same time, I was a biologist that worked on the Human Genome Project. I'm retired now. And, um, today, and I think this will come through in the podcast, I am feeling called to bring all of that work in spiritual formation and contemplative practice and awareness of the presence of God to the, um, place of keeping our hearts open in these really difficult times with climate change and other structural and systemic, uh, places of oppression and violence.

**Carla Long 02:18**

There are so many things I appreciate about you, Laurie, and one of them is that you worked on the Human Genome Project in Livermore, California. A.) that is very, very cool. Obviously, you're a brilliant scientist. But you also have this deep, deep spirituality that has always blown my mind and that you can hold both the science and the spiritual at the same time and not only hold them at the same time, but bring them together in such beautiful ways. I have always just

been fascinated by, well, let me just say this, when you talk I listen, Laurie. When you talk, I listen for sure. (Oh, that's very kind of you.) It's, I'm not really that kind. It's very true. It's very true. So, (Thank you.) Laurie, before we jump into Francis, can you tell me what you see a mystic is? What is a mystic to you?

**Laurie Gordon 03:09**

Well, I have a couple of the standard definitions of mystic. And then, um, I, I will say within that were, what it really means to me. So, Bernard McGinn, who is like the father of, uh, Christian mysticism, says that, um, the mystical element in Christianity is that part of our belief and practice that concerns preparation for, in other words, contemplative practice and that kind of thing, the consciousness of, that awakening, opening awareness, and the response to what the mystics understood as direct, immediate and transformative encounter with the presence of God. And, so, this category of the presence of God is, was fundamental to my own beginnings here. But I want to say that when I say the presence of God, that means also holding the absence of God as part of the larger understanding of the truth of the holy. To look at the world and have this sense that when the, there's this mystery, flowing in and through and around and holding and bigger than more than, but intimate with us, that awareness is what it is for me to be a mystic. But the mystics recognize that God's not a thing like another, any other thing. And, so, sometimes we experience the presence of God as, um, this absence. That ability to hold the tension of opposites to speak in non-dual lang, language because one recognizes it's not either/or, but both/and. God is both transcendent and God is imminent, held together as one. Um, paradox is part of, is one of the main hallmarks for me. Um, yeah, so, presence and absence, transcendence and imminence, but more than anything, it begins with a deep longing for the mystery of God and the recognition that God can't be named, can't be spoken truly about. But any encounter we have transforms us and changes us. And the hallmark of a mystic is one who's union with the Divine ends up in compassionate action in the world. So, so, sometimes we say what is a mystic? And I think you have to kind of start with what is the mystic not. It's not about esoteric experience. It's not about other worldly concerns. It's not about Gnosticism or special, special knowing. It's about unknowing. And, but being present in this world in this embodied, enfleshed, um, maybe shorthand, just recognizing the extraordinary in the ordinary and how completely interdependent we all are.

**Carla Long 06:04**

I mean, hearing you talk about that, it, it makes me think that I may have had like moments, like teeny tiny moments of that. And it feels, and, like, I feel like a mystic. I've never been able to expand that out to, like, a day or even 30 minutes or an hour or anything like that. I feel like a mystic has to work super hard in order to expand those teeny tiny moments that I've had where I can recognize God in a new and different way. But, man, it just sounds really hard.

**Laurie Gordon 06:38**

Well, so, I just would like to really reflect back to you, like hold up like a mirror that says you are a mystic. Those teeny tiny moments, these are fleeting transient things. They're not something to be grasped or to be held on to. And as we'll see, with Francis, it's an ongoing, lifelong process of transformation. And it, you know, occasionally there will be either a breakthrough moment, or a breakdown moment where the illusions that veil this reality, um, get pierced. There might be a moment, but the moment is only in service of a very long process of integration and surrender of the ego. Because the illusions in which we're mired that keep us from seeing the brilliance of the holy, the divine mystery that we can't name, has a lot to do with, in modern language, the entanglements we all have with our own shadows, and our egos and each other's and then the collective shadow when we just can't see anything because there's all this stuff we're unwilling to look at. So, it is very hard work. But you are a mystic. And we are all mystics. So, we have this idea, that's one of those, we're mis, mis, mystics or not, we hold up these guys and, women and men, who have had an impact in a way that people have noticed, many of them have written. But there are many, many more who are not mystical teachers, but who are mystics and experience that extraordinary moment here and there just being grateful waking up one morning and seeing the sun come up. That's, that's the whole thing right there. So, those little moments embody the whole if, if you catch those glimpses, so, so, yes, it's hard. But also, you are a mystic and anybody who's listening to this and drawn to this exploration has had those moments that caused them to say, I wanna', I, I just want to know a little more.

**Carla Long 08:56**

I'm so glad you said that because if you didn't, I was. So, listeners, I hope you heard Laurie, very clearly. She said, um, that you don't have to write books and have these huge experiences with God in order to be a mystic. Um, pretty much would you say almost everyone's a mystic maybe? Or ( . . . ) experiences with God?

**Laurie Gordon 09:15**

Well, what I would say is that Karl Rahner, um, see if I can find that quote, um, said, he said something to the effect that, um, we will all be mystics or we won't be anything because a mystic is one who experiences the reality of God and at the same time is not trapped by a certain rigid limitation around who God is. And, so, for, um, all of us to move into the future with open hearts, you know, that letting the Spirit flow, those are the moments we touch the mystery that's God and we stop limiting God. I think it's, maybe it's as much that as it's those moments when we don't limit God to our own ideas and perceptions of who God is. And it's critical. So, yeah, every, everyone, everyone has the potential and, um, everyone's journey looks different.

**Carla Long 10:23**

Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you for that. I appreciate that very much. So, you've mentioned him twice now. I think we should just jump into him. Um, where do you want to start with Francis? Do you want to start at the beginning? Or where?

**Laurie Gordon** 10:35

Yeah, well, why don't I give you a little bit about his life? Um, I, uh, actually, I think what I do want to say is why I chose Francis as a mystic to, um, to talk about today. I just feel that his, for one thing, he's one of the most well known and beloved of the saints, particularly because of his love of nature. I was actually going to ask you the question, what do you know about Francis and, and, and where does, are you drawn? But there's so much more about the way he understood what it is to be a peacemaker and to find a lifestyle that allowed him to be a peacemaker, and to promote nonviolence that he just seems very relevant for our world today because he had this extraordinary ability to see others not as enemies, but as friends, more than friends, as kin. That his ability to see all of creation interwoven with kinship, with family belonging, um, i, is beautiful, but it's also a difficult, um, choices involved. So, I, I will, think, I think I will start with just talking about that way in which his encounters were transformative, but I wanted to begin there. So,

**Carla Long** 12:03

I'm so glad you did. Thank you for doing that.

**Laurie Gordon** 12:07

Okay. So, uh, St., he, St. Francis was not a saint when he was born. He was born as a very human person. Um, he was christened as Giovanni di Bernardone. His father was a cloth merchant. This was a time in Europe when the feudal system was crumbling. Um, The, a merchant class was arising. The interchange of money was changing the whole face of, of, of Europe. Um, the, the, uh, church itself, um, was being inundated with corruption. Clerics keeping concubines and mistresses, taking money for alms, um, the Crusades were in full swing. So, he was born into a very troubled time transition, transitional time in human, human history. So, his father was a, was a cloth merchant, traveled a lot in France. His mother is, is believed to have been French. And, so, he, when, after he was born, he was nicknamed Francesco. And, so, we have Francis of Assisi. So, uh, he grew up, um, kind of the, the quintessential wild child, which I actually love about him. Um, a very sensitive sort, but very, um, flamboyant in the sense that he did a lot of eating, drinking and singing. He, he had a flair for the dramatic. He was, um, charming. He was obsessed with clothing. He was really taken with all the courtly stories and songs of the troubadours and really had this thing about chivalry and knighthood. And at the same time he was being flamboyant, some, there is some evidence, some of which has been suppressed, so, always when you're working with these mystics, you not only do you have to know that their historical context, but also the way in which what, how we know about them has been influenced by the agend, agendas of those

who've written about him. But there's some evidence that, um, there was among this group of youth that was roaming the streets of Assisi a fair amount of questionable behavior, games that were of the sort that, Francis himself never spoke about his early life. The only thing he would say is, When I was in sin, and, uh, he, but I do think he carried trauma forward. So, I'm going to say a little bit more about that. So, in, um, 1202, the, there was this war, this battle between Perugia, the, the neighboring city about 16 miles away and Assisi. They went to war and there was a battle at the, a bridge that, um, separated the two, um, communities, two communes. And it was apparently a, an utter massacre and he took part in that. So, uh, I like to remember that this, these early stories of Francis when we understand why he was so dedicated to nonviolence. So, he had this chivalrous idea, went to battle, um, participated in it, was captured, was kept in prison for a year. When he returned, he went through episodes of self loathing and disgust. He was restless and what he would do is escape into nature. Um, and because he was also a very sensitive person. Growing up, he was not only extravagant, he was generous. He would set the table with extra loaves of bread to make sure that there was leftover so he could give them to the poor. And there are stories of giving alms to poor people who came in to the shop. So, more and more that sensitivity of his underlying, who he was, came out. He tried going to bat, war again, thinking that was what he was supposed to do. And that lasted for about a day. There's a lot of stories all around that. He ended up coming back to Assisi and, and just, again, that restlessness, ill, um, and having these visions. So, here's the story I really want to tell because this is key. His conversion was this gradual, ongoing thing that lasted his whole life. But it began with those moments as a child where that, that recognition of poor people, the poor and oppressed really came out. But he was also deathly afraid of lepers. And, so, here, the story is that he was riding along on his father's horse one day and he rode past a leper at the side of the road, those who had been excluded. They weren't even allowed marriage, they weren't allowed the sacraments. They weren't allowed church access. Uh, there was, uh, just something really hard for him to look at. He was afraid of it with his lifestyle. But he stopped and he turned around and he went back. And that movement of turning is that movement of repentance, that, that, that underlying truth of what it is to change the direction of your life. And he goes back and he embraces the leper. He kisses him. And, and then, as time goes on, he goes and works in the leper colonies, it wasn't like a one time event, the, the hospitals that they had. But this is how he put it, we do have some things are actually written by him that are the most authentic, and this is what he said, When I was in sin, it seems too bitter for me to see lepers. But then the Lord led me among them, and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me, had turned into sweetness. So, that turning from bitter to sweet, what had been sweet to him before you can say what had had become bitter, what had seen bitter became sweet. And that was that in, that transformative encounter. And he's, he saw in that encounter, his own fears. He saw the truth of this man who was, um, excluded, marginalized, oppressed. He, and he saw the face of Christ. And, so, for him, his conversion did not begin with having this idea about Christ and then going and say, Oh, I'm going to be converted and do this good work. No, he saw the

leper. It was like a mirror being held up to him and, and seeing the leper and seeing himself, he saw the face of Christ. And that was the beginning of the, his true conversion. He goes on then. Um, later, a few, few months or a year or so later, he's working at San Damiano. He's looking at this amazing, that Franciscan cross, and he hears, as he gazes at the crossing the rebels and ruins of this old church, um, the voice, a voice, an inner voice in some of the, depending on who you, who you read, some say it was actually the crucifix itself, but I think that's hagiography. But, um, he hears this voice saying, Don't you see that my house is falling into ruin? Go and repair that house out of love for me. And, so, he starts spending his father's money and, um, incites the wrath of his father. There, it's a, it's a much longer story. But he had the sense that Christ had truly spoken to him and invited him to manual labor and to give up this affluent life that he had and he ran away and hid knowing that his father, he, because he sold his so, his horse and he sold a bunch of his father's cloth and, and, and he had, had all this money and, um, and, and he knew his father, who was abusive in our way of thinking about it, was gonna' go ballistic. And, so, he hid for about a month praying in a cave and then finally decided to face the music and, and, uh, I think everybody knows that story of how his father, his father's abusive, uh, feelings he didn't mind when he was spending money making up with the noblemen and getting in with the right people. But when he started giving it, selling his things in order to give away to the poor, that was sort of the drawing line and, and, uh, so, eventually, Francis goes before the Bishop of Assisi with his father, he's ( . . . ) there by his father after being imprisoned and again by his, his father. And he strips himself naked and gives everything back to this father and walks out and begins his, um, life as a, um, free man full of joy, because he is no longer burdened by possessions.

**Carla Long** 21:57

What a fascinating story. Seriously, what a fascinating story.

**Carla Long** 22:01

( . . . ) Yeah, go ahead.

**Carla Long** 22:04

I've heard, you know, like, there's been a, some other, um, major religious figures who start off really wealthy and who give up that wealth in order to do that. But, I mean, I knew, I knew that about Francis, but I hadn't heard all the details that you just hol, told, so, I'm, it's, it's really fascinating.

**Laurie Gordon** 22:23

Yeah. Yeah. And I'm trying, trying to go, there's, there's a lot of depth to all of these stories. But he were renounced his family wealth, security, power. He renounces the society's norms, he renounces the expectations that have been placed on him. He embraces poverty, which then becomes an important part of his message, and becomes fully himself because he's liberated,

he discovers joy. And so all of the things that we think of if we don't have what it takes, if we're not doing what people expect of us, that's what keeps us from joy. It's that liberation from all of those things where he found joy and then he began to construct a whole new family for himself. So, there are kind of four P's, I like to say, that kind of need a little bit of explanation when it comes to thinking about the Franciscan story. One of them is penance. He became very, uh, focused on penance. And, so, he is associated partly through the hagiography with this as, extreme asceticism. But it is really that turning around that he was really preaching on. He talks about penance, he's really not talking as much about the extremes of the choices that he made for himself so much as he is saying, We have to turn around and go a different direction. You, it, he invites us into a journey of conversion, invites us into a journey of transformation that changes the heart. And not everyone is going to follow the charism that he followed. But what he is really wanting people to do, to become people for whom peace and joy matter more than violence and possession and greed and lust. Um, we have to enter that kind of turning around. And I've been thinking a lot about that these days as we talk about the situations that are going on in our world and the call by some of modern mystics, such as Joanna Macy, talking about the fact that even as we're on the brink of major changes, we need a transformation in this society called the Great Turning. And I think Francis's moment of turning to look at what he's afraid of looking at 'cause that's the thing we, we're, we're all caught by all the things we are unwilling to see. But he's willing to see what is, he's most afraid and, um, allow it to show him the face of Christ. So, it's those moments, our own moments of turning, of penance, of repentance. I mean, that's an old word I never used to, you know, I kind of get to the point, you know, where it was like, Oh, I don't want to talk about that, because people think this is what, but it's taking on this new life of turning from lives that are not happy. And, um, turning towards an openness of heart, to the beauty of the world. So, yeah.

**Carla Long** 25:51

That's beautiful. That is just gorgeous. Thank you for saying that.

**Laurie Gordon** 25:54

So, then, the other P's that's really needed within this whole, that's, so penance is the one and I just wanted to say a little bit about that. I want to, I'll come back to poverty a little bit. I think I want to start with, but, but I do want to make this caveat really clear. And I'll probably say this a couple of times because I know when I talk about it, people tend to think of poverty in terms of structural poverty. The poverty that Francis chose was voluntary. It was not a glorification of poor and marginalized people. It was a choice to live in solidarity with those who have less. And it is a kind of poverty that has both an outer dimension, which is simplicity, like, so, if the word poverty gets to be too much as we go through this, just substitute the word simplicity, and a simpler lifestyle. So, there's this outer manifestation of simplicity, but there's also this inner poverty that he's seeking which is true humility. And, and then he associates in a lot of the stories, humility is, again, associated with true joy. If we have time, I'll tell you one of those

stories. I don't know if I'll have time, but, yeah. So, I do want to say a little bit about, because weaving, kinship and know, knowing the kinship that we have, the family relatedness, the connectedness, the flow of love between us is so essential for us in our day and age. I love, one of the things that in, initially drew me to Francis was just this assurance that we can create family. And that's part of what this journey is about as well. So, he walked out of Assisi and first of all, he, he needed a new father because his father had renounced him and rejected, rejected him. So, the first father he claims is God as Father. This is, remember we're in, we're in, um, 13, early 13th century Italy. So, the first thing he says is, Listen to me. Until now, I've been called the son of Pietro di Bernardoni, sorry for my non-Italian accent, um, and I returned him the money that he wanted. I will return to him all the clothing that was his. And I only want to say from now our father who's in heaven and not my father is Pietro. And then he chose for himself as a, as a father, a very poor and despised man and asked him to go with him. And, in return for alms, that every time he, his father would come by when they were in Assisi, to bless him by making the sign of the cross over his head. So, he chose in the poor, uh, in a beggar the very opposite of what his father stood for a father. And then he began assembling the Friars Minor, the, the other young men who saw him and were attracted and who were willing to give up their possessions to go follow this lifestyle because there was just this yearning for something different in these violent times. And they went into a church together that his first several followers with him, and they open, they, you know, they proof text as they kind of opened the Bible. And they found, um, these three passages Go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come follow me in Matthew 19:20. Then they proof text, Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread nor money, don't even take an extra tunic. That's in Luke nine, nine verse three. And then the third one they found was, If any want to become my followers, Jesus is saying this, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. And those became the foundation of, of his fraternity. And, and what he said was, according to one of his early biographers, This is what I want. This is what I've been seeking. This is what I want to do with all my heart. So, he creates this fraternity of brothers wherein there is no class distinctions. Um, they, they share, um, that, you know, they share duties, they walk the road together. And they are, he also recognizes, be, called to be mothers to each other. So, he's lost his father, he's lost his mother, he's lost, but his, he's lost his siblings, but now key is, um, in a fraternity with those who will mother him, who will be gently nurturing of him.

### **Laurie Gordon 30:50**

And, um, they go about their work in great joy. He, uh, there's actually stories about, there's paintings where, uh, he marries Lady Poverty, so he's actually re, poverty becomes his spouse. And then, uh, you know, later on he, uh, when he's about 30, uh, and Clare's about 18, and there was this young ( . . . ) woman who was taken with his vision. And she also, um, asked to join, and that's a whole nother story, but it's actually central and I hate to leave it out for time because she became, uh, she was a force. She was not, uh, she, she believed in this



vision of not possessing things so strongly. She's the one who actually saved Franciscan intuitions after Francis died from being a, being further, um, lost to the institution. So, I, yeah, I really hate to leave her out. But he, so they were mothers of each other, they loved each other deeply, served each other, took care of each other as a mother for an only and beloved child. And they also saw themselves as, um, carrying that possibility of being mothers of Christ, um, that we, they became mothers of Christ when they carried Jesus in their hearts, in their bodies through love. And that they felt very strongly that they gave birth to Christ through their holy works. And that is actually, that part is actually from something that he himself wrote. So, yeah. And then finally, you know, uh, beyond Clare, and I, you know, I can say more if you'd like, um, he invites other creatures to become part of his family. So, I'll stop there for a moment. But I really want to focus, I want to say a little bit more about his love of nature and creatures.

**Carla Long 33:06**

Yes, because I think that's, I mean, lots of people know lots of things about Francis. But I think his love of nature is probably what people know, most, you know, considering his statues are always surrounded by animals, like, like some sort of Disney princess. (Yeah.) He has like birds on his shoulders and squirrels, and, so, I think that that's an important part for people to understand. It's not like, well, I don't even know what it's, I don't even know exactly what it's like. So, I'm looking forward to hearing more about, um, exactly how he showed his love of nature. I mean, did he go out in the forest and stand and lots of animals came and sat on him?

**Laurie Gordon 33:43**

Well, as far as we know, yeah, as far as we know. So, um, so Francis, uh, there are all, all sorts of stories about Francis and his reverence for nature. So he was able to extend his awareness of this deep, what we would call kinship, this deep fraternity, in his, his words, to the natural world to animate as well as inanimate things. So, there was, his biographers say that he would, um, be careful where he washed his hands so that he didn't trample the water. He would be careful of the rocks on the road. He would pick up worms and move them so that he, he didn't, um, step on them. He would set out honey and wine for bees in the winter. One of the stories I love as I think about how important native, uh, landscapes are in this day and age is, he had this intuition that he, and required the brothers when they, they made their garden to keep part of it a se, set aside for wild, to stay wild. So, he was doing native landscaping, you know, before that was even a thing. He just had this love of nature and not, and this awareness that, um, these creatures needed, needed their space and so they, even though they would plant gardens for their food as part of their simple li, lifestyle that was based on manual labor, they would always keep part native and they would also always put, um, flowers so that there was beauty there as well as the utilitarian of it. So, I, I love, uh, the, the stories of, of Francis, but that, you know, your statue in the garden, you know, that we all have, you just mentioned it Carla, you know, we're he's sitting there, I love this, this, you know, he's got his hand on his heart and he's got his palm up and open and there's a little bird nestling in

it. So, I'm gonna' read you this story from, um, the, um, second Solano, which is one of his hagiographers. Heading to the Hermitage of ( . . . ), blessed Francis was crossing the lake in a small boat, and a fisherman offered him a little waterbird so that he might rejoice in the Lord over it. And the blessed father received it gladly with open hands, gently invited it to fly and to be free. But the bird did not want to leave. Instead, it settled down in his hands, as in a nest, and the saint, his eyes lifted up, remained in prayer. Returning to himself as if after a long stay in another place, he sweetly told the little bird to return to its original freedom. And, so, the bird, having received permission with a blessing, flew away expressing its joy in the movement of its body. When Francis was on ( . . . ) late in his life, it is said that birds would just fly around his hut. And he made friends with a falcon who would wake him up in the morning. If he was feeling well, but at this, by the time Francis is at the end of his life, he's very ill and the last years of his life, he was in a lot of pain from, um, ver, from his travels and his wounds, and the Falcon would not wake him up on mornings when it thought he needed a little extra sleep. So, these beautiful stories and then the, the quintessential famous story, which is attested to in a, in quite a few of even the earlier writings, is the story of Francis preaching to the birds. And, so, here's the story and here's my, the other two P's I mentioned. So, I had mentioned that the Franciscan charism is based on this penance, this repentance and turning, and on this lifestyle that recognizes that having possessions means that you have to defend them and therefore you cannot make peace because you're just always defending your possessions. So, this lifestyle that, of liberation through poverty, but that is supported with what, with prayer and preaching. So, there's this contemplative dimension of prayer and I like to ask myself, as well as people when I talk about Francis, to imagine the depth of silence and presence and being in the moment that you could open your hands and cup them there like a nest for a bird, that a bird would just want to be in your hands and not fly away. What kind of stillness had he cultivated?

**Laurie Gordon 39:07**

So, Francis, unlike many of the other mystics, didn't write a lot about his personal experiences. As a matter of fact, he was pretty explicit that you shouldn't be talking about that, but that he had them is very clear. So, there's this piece about prayer. And then there's this piece about proclaiming p, peace. Um, preaching, but preaching for him was about the deeds and not about the words even though he used words and he used a lot of song. Being in the world, preaching through just the way he was acting like a fool and going from town to town and being a peacemaker because he had no vested interest in whatever was causing the violence and the dissension. Um, so he got to a point where he started questioning whether or not he should preach to the world, or whether he should just retire and do contemplative prayer full time. And, so, he asked two of his companions, Father Sylvester and Clare to discern this for him. And, and Sylvester goes off and he comes back and says, No, you need to keep preaching. That's what you're called to do. And Clare comes back through an intermediary and says, Yeah, you're supposed to keep doing this. You're supposed to be in the world letting the

world see this. And, so, he goes out and the first thing he does is he starts preaching to the birds. And, so, there's this beautiful image and one of my favorite, you know, uh, images of Francis's is having all of these birds surrounding him and him preaching it and, and the sources are pretty, um, explicit about exactly where it took place. So, and I had not noticed this until recent, recently, um, that what he says to the birds is this, My little bird sisters, you should praise your Creator, because God has given you the gift of flight and freedom, colorful clothing, food and water. And you never need to say you have such beautiful joy, voices, he gives you rivers and springs to drink from. The mountains and the crags are your refuge. The trees are theirs to make nests. God gives you all you need. So, your Creator loves you, therefore, always be grateful. And what I hadn't noticed is, is, this is a celebration of the kind of abundance that allows one not to need extra stuff. It's this, this recognition that's coming through, especially, um, in ecological work today where we're turning to indigenous sources of wisdom and knowledge that begin with the recognition that we have enough. We can have lifestyles of simplicity if we recognize that everything is given to us. There's all this abundance around us and I have enough. I don't need more. It's anti-consumer. It's anti-materialist. It's anti-capitalist. It's anti-countercultural. And it is facilitated by, it begins in and ends with gratitude. And, and we are receiving this message today from, um, indigenous wisdom elders. And we can look to this tradition of someone who lived simply on the land. And that's what shows up is just, he's saying to these birds, You have everything. And, um, it's just this beautiful, beautiful celebration of why we don't need to consume. So, the, so, the then the, the, um, the way the sermon is recorded, of course, we don't know what really happened. The way the sermon is recorded, embodies the very essence of what it is to choose a lifestyle that's more simple. That is, um, going without so that others who don't have as much have more. And he did all of this, um, in, in concert with the preachers, and, and then he would sing with the birds. There's a later story where, um, that was actually several centuries later, is much less likely to be true. But there's this lovely story of he and Brother Leo being out and there's a nightingale singing in the bushes. So, he decides, Well, let's sing with him and let's sing antiphonally. So, he and the nightingale get into this back and forth duet. And they just sing until Francis finally has to give up in the nightingale wins and flies away because, uh, so this beauty of song.

**Carla Long** 44:00

I just love the way you talk about him. I just love hearing these stories about him. I, I think that, um, this whole, like, non-possession thing, uh, it makes me really uncomfortable, actually, when I hear you talk about it because I, I, I just look at my basement and I have lots of possessions that I don't want to give up, you know, and I, it, it makes me super uncomfortable. However, I could give up something. I could give up more. I couldn't be less attached to these things that I have around me. But when I hear you say that I'm like, Oh, he could do it, but I could never, ever, ever do that.

**Laurie Gordon 44:39**

Well, and, so, again, I, and thank you for saying that because that's a really important thing to say is that I don't think we're called to the level of extremity that he was. He didn't even demand, he, he was pretty demanding. But he demanded more of himself and actually, um, tried to get the brothers, and Clare in particular, who probably had a, she was probably anorexic, she ate so little, he actually said you got to eat, you got to eat more, you know, he tried to moderate some of the asceticism, and that was part of their day and age. So, that is a caution. Whenever we're working with these mystics is we're running into cultural values that, that no longer seem appropriate. But this kind of simplicity that he's calling us to might allow me to say, Do I really need to order the, this book? Um, and at the end of his, very end of his life, one of the last things he's reported to have said is, I've done what I was called to do, but you need to do what you were called to do. And, so, that's, there is a danger. I, this is not an invitation into the extreme asceticism. It's, a, a, an invitation into looking more deeply at our own broken places that, that are trying to, um, a, a, and our participation in our culture that we're, in which we're enmeshed. And so there's this constant that actually kind of leads me into the, you know, one, one story I want to offer, too, a, about the way in which he makes choices, not by putting the other at a distance and saying they're an enemy, but by befriending the enemy, including our own, our own inner needs. Uh, he, he was harsh with himself, I will say, to a fault, and, um, he did some pretty wacky things. But he had a gentleness with everyone else. So, there's a story ( . . . ). So, one of the brothers trying to do this thing, you know, eating less, woke up in the middle of the night just crying out because he was so hungry and so miserable. And Francis heard him and woke everybody up and set a table and had, made sure, and they all sat around and had a feast. And he was very clear about us following, following our own moderating, uh, according to our own needs, and just being, it's about the seeing and, um, making choices. It's not about trying to rigidly follow something that doesn't make sense for us or for you. But I have that same, I have that same reaction kind of going, hmm. You know, what, where are the places, um, that I, I can simplify my outer life. But it needs to be in response to that inner place of call and a, a recognition of who we are and our place in history and what our time is called for. And it's his conversion took his whole life and beyond, and I just let his voice be gentle I in my head, which, whenever I've sort of encountered in that way, there's nothing there but gentleness, and compassion, you know, that he lived in a day and time when asceticism was a, another one of those, uh, chains. So finding the middle path.

**Carla Long 48:44**

I really appreciate you said that, um, because I, I do think that there are moments we, when I like to hear about St. Francis and things like that, when I'm like, It's good for me to take a look at myself and good for me to take a look around me. And those are the moments when I'm like I can, I can do a little bit better with this here. So, those are moments that call me back to a place where God is probably calling me as well, since, since I had that little, that little pinprick,

you know, like, Oh, oh, I feel that hard. Those are the moments that we should listen to, I think, so,

**Laurie Gordon 49:17**

Well, and, and ( . . . ) to listen to them, but to listen to them not as some sort of a harsh. There's two voices. There's the voice of Pietro that's abusive and harsh on us, um, that creates, um, some of the self negative things that I think are evident in some of Fran, the Franciscan stories. There's this one story where he's walking along with, with Brother Leo and, and they don't have a liturgy yet, so, he's goin' Brother Leo, so, this is what I want you to do. I want you to say, Oh, Francis is, you know, um, really has failed and, um, is full of sin. And Leo's, like, Okay, I'll do that. And so they, he'd go, Okay, Francis has really failed and I'm full of sin and Leo would go, God, God is, God wants Francis to know he's blessed and beloved. And Francis, said, No, no, no. You're supposed to say I'm bad and I'm full of sin and Leo's like, Okay, I'm gonna' try. And they go on like this on and on and on. And in the end, God refuses the negative language that is in Francis around this idea of sin and says, No. A, and Leo, who tries to do what his friend wants him to do, can't, because the voice of God within him is saying, The words I mean to speak are these words of gentleness and compassion. Basically, God's saying, nuh uh. I'm, you're not the son of Pietro. You're not, you're not the son of the harsh voice. You are the son of, uh, one who loves you like a mother and brother and father and stuff.

**Laurie Gordon 49:48**

You know, I preach about that God all the time. But I rarely let that God talk to me. So, I really appreciate that you said that.

**Laurie Gordon 51:08**

I, i, i, it's amazing in ( . . . ), i, if you go into some of the stories that were written about him. There's another story where he gets after Brother Rufino because he doesn't immediately obey him to go, um, preach, because Rufino's actually, I think it's Brother Rufino. It's actually a contemplative. And, so, he gets on him and, and, and, and says, Because you didn't obey me, I want you to, to strip, which meant stripping to their underwear, the hagiographers are quick to let us know, um, and, and go to Assisi and preach in your underwear. So, Rufino does that. And then it's, the story i, I, I, this is how I hear this story. Um, he goes, What did I just do? I'm the, I'm the son of Pietro Bernardoni, which you could interpret to say, you know, I know what it's like to have come from a, you know, background where this would be embarrassing, but I think what he's really saying is, I, I'm acting like my father did and I don't want to do that. And, so, he recognizes his harshness. So, he takes his clothes off. He does, he did a lot of that. Hands them to Brother Leo. Leo takes and, and goes into Assisi and finds Rufino, um, preaching in the cathedral. Everybody's laughing at him. And he joins him and they start speaking about this lifestyle of turning around and, and, um, all the, uh, all the laughter and all

of the titters, you know, get quieter and quieter and people listen and hear a message. So, so, there's that recognition that we carry, we do carry those harsh voices in us. And yet over and over when he's, when he is dealing with someone else, his gentleness and compassion comes through. And that's the voice, I would think, even as we ask those questions about how can I simplify my lifestyle, I think Francis would also be saying, Yes, you're invited to make this turning to open your heart, but you're not to do it just because you should do it. It, it's, so that inner poverty of Spirit is, is what we're cultivating. Yeah.

**Carla Long 53:38**

Oh, wow. See, listeners, I told you the very beginning, when Laurie speaks, you should really listen because there's lots and lots and lots of good nuggets in there. So, Laurie, we have only about 10 minutes left. I know you could talk about Francis a lot longer, but we only have about 10 minutes left. What would you tell us about Francis if you only had 10 minutes to talk about? Then wrap it up.

**Laurie Gordon 53:58**

So, to wrap it up, well, so, 10 minutes. Now I have a little timer here, I'm gonna try to do it this way. Um, I do want to very briefly talk about his journey to the Sultan. So, uh, and then I want to talk about the Canticle of the Creatures. I think that's where I would really like to end. A, as Francis is living his life during the time of the Crusades, now the fifth crusade is going on in Damietta, Egypt, and he goes to Egypt. And, um, there's actually quite a long, long story about he, how he recognized what the, um, crusaders are doing to be a violence that they were going to suffer from. There's also, um, stories among the, um, leaders of the expedition complaining about the fact that he was among the soldiers and some of them decided they'd rather be a follower of Francis's way than being in this violent place. So, here's this person who as a young man had been vio, had been traumatized. And I, I think probably in our day and age we'd say had PTSD, going in to this war zone where there was massacre and he decided that he was going to go see the Sultan. Now, the ol, later biographers who want to spiritualize everything say he wanted to go convert him. But he crossed the demilitarized zone as this poor man. A, and, in, because he refused to accept gifts, refused to accept possessions, came so humbly, spent about two weeks with the Sultan and with his, um, spirit, Sufi spiritual advisors. And apparently they had, uh, uh these conversations. There's some suggesting they were cosmological in nature about the nature of God and Spirit. And what's really beautiful about it is, is even though some of the biographers would like to make you think that he did, he converted the Sultan, they basically were in this exchange of dialogue. And to this day, the basilica in Assisi is one, one place in Christendom where inter religious dialogue can take, take place. He made suggestions to the Sultan that the Sultan actually tried to implement to try to bring the war to a conclusion. And it was the Cardinal Prelate who refused to let the, the crusaders accept those terms of passage to Jerusalem. But he came home himself influenced by his conversation with the person who believed differently than he did. So, this thing about

otherness translated to his peacemaking across religious, and dare I say, political boundaries. And what he says, he wrote a rule when he came back, which was not accepted. He had to rewrite it. But the rule he wanted, um, said that when you go among those sarafins, because that was, that was what it was in his day and age, this is what you need to do. You basically need to enter into dialogue, but not into argument and disputation. And only if and, and you can stay true to your sense of who you are, a, as a Christian, and only if and as something that moves in you that there's a way to share, um, share across those religious boundaries and do it then, which seems so obvious to us, but if you think about that, in that day and age, and then he came home, he wrote these beautiful songs, and towards the end of his life. And one of them, what is clear, pretty clear to those who really look deeply at this incident that he himself came home and allowed himself to be changed by this interchange with somebody of a different faith than his. He, um, wrote this beautiful, um, set of praises, you know, um, to the Lord, You are love, you are peace, you are humility, you are, and it just goes on and on and on, kind of in the way that the Muslims recognize the many names of God.

**Laurie Gordon 58:15**

And he believed, uh, he came, the only thing he may have come back with that he accepted was an os horn to call people to prayer. And he then incorporated a call to prayer with a bell into their daily rhythms of life. So, so, just wanted to, to mention that particular piece. There's a beautiful icon that you can look up online by, uh, a Franciscan. His name is Robert Lentz, I think, and has Francis and the Sultan with this holy fire of love, shrouded in this holy fire of love as they spoke, um, peace together. So, but he came back because he thought, because the order was being taken over, was being institutionalized, was being made to look actually more, um, ascetic and less with a charism of poverty. And he came back and tried and failed and had to give up and start all over again. And by this time, he had trachoma he had, he, he was hurting. He went to the, to the mountain. The story about the stigmata, I think, is fascinating. We don't have time to go into that. But I would just say, I think part of that story is not only about did he or didn't he actually bear the wounds of Christ after this vision that came with more interactions with birds. Um, but how he carried the wounds of his life in his flesh in his soul, and yet had this, um, incredible experience of union with God. He also came back, you may not know this, just make sure everybody knows that, um, he did the first creche ever, so, when you celebrate your creche at Christmas, that was Francis. But he came back tired and worried towards the end of his life to San Damiano, or Clare and the poor sisters lived. And he was by this time basically, um, blind. His eyes had, they tried to cauterize his eyes with a red hot iron. And, um, he writes this incredible hymn that we all know as the Canticle of Creatures, a song. So, I wanted to end there, because, um, what I wanted to say about it is the way in which it becomes this powerful expression that, I think, all of us need, of his understanding of how interconnected all of life and all the, all the elements, and all the creatures are connected through the brilliance of the light of the, of the one who's the Trinity. So, he writes this cosmological song at the end. And it starts out saying most high, all

powerful, good Lord, to you are the praises, the glory, and the honor and every blessing to you, most high, all this belongs, but no one is worthy to pronounce your name, which is again, a piece from his sojourn in Egypt as well as that mystical intuition that the, that God, that what we call God is a mystery that can't really be named. And then he goes on and he tries to name it and he names it, first of all, he's blind, seeing the light hurts his eyes. And he starts out saying, Praise be to you, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Brother Sun.

**Laurie Gordon 1:01:54**

So, the, so, the first two verse, first two strokes, are about God. And then he goes into these, this piece about Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the stars. So, one light, three sources of light. So, there's, it's, so he's embodying both his sense of the light that is the holy mystery, the brotherhood and sisterhood of sun and moon and stars, but somehow also representing the Trinity in unity. And then the next four verses are the ancient elements of earth in the ancient order, which is, Praise for you, Brother Wind. And then he gives four descriptors of Brother Wind, praised be you Sister Water, gives four descriptors of Sister Water, praised be you, Brother Fire, and then four descriptors of fire. and praised be you My Lord, Sister/Mother Earth, and four descriptors. At least I'm told in Italian, the English, it's a little harder to find the four, but he actually structured this, to say, to say, here's the one in the three. And then here's the four elements of which all of creation is created seeing them as kin brother and sister. This cosmological hymn and, and then that was the end of the song as it was originally written. And he, they set it to music, they began to sing it. But where's the human in this song? So, I, I would encourage anybody to go look this up and actually spend some time with, with all of this and add your own verses to it, of, of praise. So, he gets, he's sick, he gets moved to the bishop's palace in Assisi where he can get better care. And the bishop and the secular governor of Assisi are in this huge battle. So, one's excommunicating. The Podesta, the Podesta's not letting anybody do anything with the church. And they're going back and forth, back and forth. And you know what sick, dying, Francis does? He brings the brothers together and gets them to sing this canticle. And as he sings the canticle, um, he adds a verse, and he adds the verse about, um, pardon. So, then, um, his, Praise for you, my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love, who bear infirmity in tribulation. Blessed are those who endure in peace for you. But he added those verses to make peace between the bishop and the Podesta, the head of the commune. And, so, his peacemaking becomes the place where the human is in this canticle the pe, those who need peace. And then, a year or so later, when he's really dying, he adds the final verses to it. And the final verses are, Praised be you, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death from whom no living man can escape. And it becomes a recognition that death is part of life and part of the cosmological order. And that, um, those who have loved him will be alright because he knows he's gonna' to be alright. And, so, it is this recognition, even though it's not done in the standard mystical tropes, he's not saying, Oh, God is transcendent and imminent and doing all the theological thing, he, no, he's, he's feeling it, he's living it, he's singing it, he's weaving it all together. And it's one great family of being of



which humans are the ones who sing the song. So, I wanted to make sure we ended with that because that's the piece that, um, I just think that's what Francis is. That's his biggest, most profound legacy. And he's become the patron saint of all things ecological, inter religious dialogue, he invites us to personal conversion and transformation. And, um, yeah, invites us to that transformation of a lived engagement with Christ because he, that's who he loved. Yeah.

**Carla Long** 1:06:24

Wow, Laurie, I, this has just been so fascinating for me. I've learned so much from you about, and I, and I could tell how much you love him, the way you spoke about him, and how much, like, just how rich his life was and continues to be for people who study him. So, thank you so much for your knowledge. And thank you so much for sharing that with us. I really appreciate it a lot.

**Laurie Gordon** 1:06:47

You're very welcome. And we only scratched the surface, but he is, I would invite everybody to find, if it's not Francis, find a wisdom person, um, or persons that can help be a companion on your own spiritual journey. That's what, that's why, that's why it's, why we, why we teach. It's, it's, it's not about the learning. It's about how, how then do I find that change of heart that makes me open to all the wounds of the world and do it with singing? What we need in this day and age?

**Carla Long** 1:07:29

Absolutely. I, I do not disagree. Well, thank you again, Laurie. (You're so welcome.)

**Josh Mangelson** 1:07:42

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