

Finding Saint Francis

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I grew up a Baptist in the Bible Belt of North Carolina, and I didn't meet a Catholic until college. My knowledge of saints was limited to St. Patrick, the patron saint of big parties with green beer. I saw "Brother Sun, Sister Moon, but mainly because the girl I was dating at the time wanted to. I can't say I learned a lot. But all that changed when I moved to New Orleans after grad school.

I took a job teaching at the University of New Orleans. One of my students, Liz, volunteered at the zoo and set me up on a blind date with one of the zoo keepers, Jamie. I took her out for coffee, not wanting to spend much on a first date. By that time, I was in my 30s, old enough to know that if you couldn't talk to each other, the relationship had no future. Jamie and I talked until the coffeeshop closed and then went out for a beer. Less than a year later, we were married in a big old Catholic church not far from the New Orleans streetcar line.

Jamie's confirmation name is Clare, St. Francis's good buddy. Some of Jamie's zoo friends went in together and bought us a statue of St. Francis for a wedding present. Jamie worked in the birdhouse at the zoo, and the 2-foot, resin statue held in its hands a tray for birdseed. In our backyard was an old maple, rotted out at the bottom on the side facing the yard, creating an opening a bit like a grotto. I placed bricks inside the base of the tree cavity and then put St Francis upon them, looking out at the backyard. Squirrels scampered in and out of the trunk and stole Francis's birdseed. A year or two later, a pair of screech owls raised a family in holes in a rotting limb. My wife and I had two daughters, adding to our own nest. Underneath the tree, I built a deck with a bench swing, then another deck that raised higher to look out over the adjoining park.

In one of my favorite photos from that time, my tiny daughters, in dress-up outfits, tiaras on their heads, stand on that upper deck next to where I sit at one of their play tables, sipping a beer and peeling crab and crawfish, my lovely daughters eating as fast as I can peel.

Next to the deck grew zinnias and ginger and Confederate jasmine. Jamie planted some banana plants, which she thought were dwarf, that soon grew 15 feet tall. We added tiki-torches and ran cords for spotlights to shine up into the green. A large swingset nearby entertained both daughters for hours. When our old dog died, we buried him nearby, a memorial garden atop his body. He and St. Francis shared in parties where students would still show up at midnight and sit in the backyard talking at 3:00 a.m. when I finally turned in. I built a grill of stone where a Chinese grad student learned to barbecue. The November weather was often warm up enough that the Thanksgiving dinner crowd of 70 or more overflowed into the backyard. Yes, Francis saw some living.

But eventually it came time to leave New Orleans and move to Dubuque. The big state university was constantly starved by the Louisiana Legislature, as were the public elementary schools that my daughters would attend. Rather than pay, Louisiana had rather pray and play politics. In packing up, somehow St. Francis stayed behind. Maybe our car was already full and he was too big and heavy. Regardless, Francis was still in the backyard eight months later when Hurricane Katrina hit.

I have a map I show my classes made in 1981 that shows the risk of a great hurricane hitting the New Orleans area, the probability in any given year 4%, 1 in 25. And 24 years later Katrina hit. But there are still those that would prefer to ignore the science and blame someone they don't like. "Wow, that storm was HUGE. Who could have known science was so complicated?"

A San Antonio pastor said that Katrina was due to a scheduled gay pride parade at about that time. It reminds me of the story of the nun and priest playing golf.

A nun and priest are at the first hole, ready to tee off. The priest places his ball, wiggles his stick, and swings. He looks down. The ball hasn't moved.

"Damn it! Missed!" he says.

"Please, Father, don't speak that way. God will surely punish you," the nun says.

On toward the next hole. They tee up. The priest swings. "Damn it! Missed!" he says.

"Please, Father, don't speak that way. God will surely punish you," the nun says.

On toward the next hole. They tee up. The priest swings. "Damn it! Missed!" he says.

Suddenly a lightning bolt descends from the sky. And hits. . . the nun.

From up above comes a booming voice. "Damn it! Missed!"

Hurricane Katrina mostly killed poor people, old or African-American. The gay section of town was left relatively high and dry. If that were whom God was targeting, he's a damn poor shot. The city suffered beyond what any cosmic lesson-plan can justify.

Two-and-a-half years later, I took a group of students to New Orleans for a Geology and Jazz course. A swamp tour, a hike in the marsh, and such in the morning. Music and night. And good food throughout. It was soon enough after Katrina that there was still lots of damage everywhere. We drove by my old neighborhood, and my old house stood empty. The front glass was broken out, and the side door was missing. All the drywall and insulation had been gutted. A couple of ceiling fans hung with the blades downward from the heat and humidity. But the screened-in porch I had built still stood, having survived Katrina, the finest testament ever to my construction skills.

The backyard was overgrown with weeds. The salty floodwaters put the old ligustrum hedge out of its misery. I hated that thing, so I shed no tears for its demise. The copper tubes from the air conditioner had been taken by some enterprising thief. And the park behind the house had transformed into a staging area for equipment rebuilding the nearby levee, one of those that failed after the storm.

As the students wandered through the area where many students had once partied, one saw something through the weeds. He tromped closer. Though it was heavy and covered in debris, he picked up St. Francis and brought him to me. Francis had spent the hurricane right there in the water with the other sufferers.

Francis now hangs on my back deck in Dubuque next to a beer-bottle opener, the caps resting on Francis's bird-seed tray. We've strung lights in the tree that grows through a hole in the center of the deck, put up umbrellas, refurbished swinging chairs that my wife found on the side of the road, and built tables from scrap wood. In that now sacred space, Francis looks out over parties and geology classes and writers workshops and conversations bordering on therapy. In his presence, friends have shared intimacies and joy and pain—their stories. Having his statue hanging nearby reminds me of his words:

"We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost their way."