Once upon a time, there was a deeply faithful monk.¹ He lived a life of poverty, simplicity, and chastity in a secluded monastery; a life marked by regular times of prayer, diligent study, generous hospitality, and genuine kindness. He gave himself freely as a disciple of Christ and found great meaning in this life of service. At a ripe old age, he became ill and declined swiftly. One evening, after receiving last rites, his breathing slowed and his body settled, and his brothers took him for dead. It was the custom of this order to bury the deceased in a wall along the edge of the property, where tombs were sealed over by stones laid by the brothers. And so, after the funeral mass, they took their friend to his final resting place and, brick by brick, sealed him into the rock, returning his mortal form to the earth.

The next day, while toiling in the fields, a couple of the monks heard muffled sounds coming from the wall. Alarmed, they ran to the new grave, and began tearing the bricks from their freshly set mortar, a rush of dank air coming out of the tomb along with the cries of their friend: not dead at all, but very much alive! The abbot was summoned as the brothers gathered, slowly disassembling the wall as the monk explained that he had indeed died – or come close – and he went to heaven, and he met St. Peter and Jesus, and it was nothing at all like the Church had taught. He had seen eternity and it was not what they expected.

The abbot and the other monks became alarmed at the words of their friend, and decided that before word of this strange occurrence got out to reseal the wall, closing the door forever on their once upon a time brother and the disturbing truth he brought back with him. This haunting, apocryphal tale says a lot about how many people experience their faith. We think we know something about God, eternity, truth. We are willing, even, to give our lives to it. But when we dig a little deeper and encounter something that challenges what we once thought we knew, we may not approach it with curiosity and wonder, adventure and trust. Instead, we may try to turn...

¹ A version of this (probably apocryphal) tale can be found in Parker Palmer’s The Active Life, page 28, though I’ve expanded it somewhat.
away, try to ignore, deny, or bury this new information. This thing that doesn’t seem to fit. Better to seal it away in the wall than have to make room for it in ourselves, our worldview, our faith.

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis, and my guess is many of us think we know something about this guy. He has quite the reputation, after all. Talking to birds. Communing with the earth. A real tree hugger, that one. There’s also the time he talked that dangerous wolf into leaving the people of Gubbio alone. His forward-thinking friendship with St. Clare. His kindness to lepers. His penchant for hitchhiking and poverty and organic vegan cuisine. He sounds pretty cool. A nice face for the counter-culture of the 12th century, palatable and inspiring even today to Christians and non-Christians alike.

But if we dig a little deeper, we might be surprised by what we uncover about Francis. Like that the vast majority of his writing is not about peace, love, and communing with nature. In fact, the only two surviving examples of such writing are probably his most widely known: the canticle of creation (“Be praised Good Lord for Brother Sun…”) and the Prayer of St. Francis (“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace”). Instead, the overwhelming majority of Francis’ writing is about the Eucharist. He was unconventional, there is no question about that, but his piety was deeply sacramental. He was profoundly moved by the example of Jesus – not only in heart but in mind and body, as it was Jesus’ own homelessness, his self-giving and self-emptying love, epitomized on the cross and remembered around the altar, that took Francis to the road traveling from town to town, begging for food, trusting entirely in God’s providence, as he tried to share this great good news with everyone he could find.

He was not so much a flower child as a Jesus freak … or maybe a bit of both. So sincere, so heart-felt, so deep was his love of Christ, his Christian piety, his gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice and his earnest desire to live in the way of Jesus that Francis is the first saint credited in the Catholic tradition with receiving the stigmata: his hands and feet split open as with nails on hard wood; his side wounded as by a spear. (In fact, one way to tell if a piece of art if depicting Francis is to look for these wounds.) So close was his heart to the heart of Jesus that his body began to resemble it, too.

At first blush, this fuller, truer, more multi-dimensional and nuanced picture of Francis, son of Assisi, may not much resemble our initial impressions, or those impressions popular outside these walls: the guy who was so out there that even a city like San Francisco proudly bears his name. But if we turn away too quickly – if we are so alarmed by this new information,
and the apparent discrepancies and complexities that come with it, that we’re tempted to seal it back into the wall and pretend we never knew, well, we do ourselves a disservice.

Francis was a deeply traditional Christian. He was fervently moved by the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He held very high views of tradition, doctrine, and the clergy. And it was out of this deeply sincere, incredibly orthodox, love and commitment not only to the ideals of Christ but also to the Church that Francis’ chose, willingly, a life of poverty and instability. A life traveling from place to place, owning nothing, relying on the kindness of strangers. That he came to see the Spirit of God not only in the bread and wine made holy at communion or in people who took those elements into their bodies and out into the world, as we do Sunday after Sunday, but also in the sick and the sinful, the orphan and the outcast, the squirrels and the rats and the gnats and the trees and the flowers and the sun and the streams and the stars. Francis’ entire life was so consumed with a love of God that he came to see God everywhere, to celebrate God everywhere, and to reverence God everywhere, not in spite of his quite traditional Christian faith but because of it. Setting our piety and our curiosity at opposite ends of a spectrum is not only unhelpful, it is unnecessary. There is nothing more traditional than for a Christian to be called to love – to love God, to love ourselves, neighbors, strangers, the earth, and every living being.

The invitation for each of us, not only once for all but over and over again is to discern how God would have us live out this radical, traditional, beautiful faith. I’ve heard many people moved by the example of Francis also, frankly, turned off by it. His path was so extreme. His way so costly. It can seem, nearly, inhuman. What is one to learn from it, to take from it? But here’s the thing. I’m sure there were countless other everyday saints alive during Francis’ time. Folks who, like him, were consumed with a fiery passion for the Eucharist and the rituals of the Church. Who eagerly came to mass and confession. Who wished with all their heart, mind, strength and souls to faithfully follow the way of Jesus. And who were called into marriage, into carpentry, into business, into parish ministry, into agriculture or literature or law or travel or government or teaching. All of those vocations could be faithful ways to order a life after the way of Jesus.

The takeaway from Francis’ example is not that we are all called to radical poverty, eco-activism, and outspoken evangelism, though some surely are, but that we are invited into the
very same love that Francis fully embraced, and that we can trust the God calling to us from that love to show us how we might live more fully, more faithfully. In traditional, orthodox Christian language, we call this exercise in listening, “discernment,” and it is at the heart of the mission of the Church. The whole reason for all of this is to support one another in discerning God’s call on each of our lives and our life together. We have countless opportunities to do this. Infinite, even. And we can always shift course. Change our minds. Correct our paths. The point is that there is no one way, because God made each of us unique, to shine with God’s unique and boundless glory, so what might look like a bit much to one feels liberating, life-giving, relieving to another. It’s not that anything goes but that the going looks different for each of us.

I’ve recently been talking with a lot of Catholics who are struggling with how their Church is responding to sex abuse scandals and resisting the leadership of women, and who are questioning their ongoing identification with Rome as a result. And whenever this comes up, I’m keenly aware of how many faithful responses there might be to their very holy angst, anger, and grief. I’m sure some are called to leave. I’m sure for many staying would feel like the end of their genuine connection with Jesus, who sided always with the vulnerable and violated. And I’m sure there are others who are being called to stay, and to keep advocating for change from within, and to be a thorn in the side of their parish council and their local priest and whoever else will listen. And I’m sure there are people called to every possible place in between these two extremes.

I offer this example not to rag on our Catholic siblings but as a reminder that at different points in our history as The Episcopal Church the same has been, and continues to be, true. When women were not only not allowed to be ordained but not allowed to serve on vestries or help lead worship, there were some who left, indignant and outraged and tired of waiting. But there were others who stayed, and agitated, and faced tremendous pressure and suspicion and out and out hostility until we were welcomed into the ranks of ecclesial leadership. And both of these could have been faithful responses. Both played a part in moving us closer to the coming Kingdom. So when someone comes to me to talk about their struggle with their Church – this or another – I can rarely recommend one specific course of action. Instead, I try to support them in their discernment.

This is, by the way, as true in our personal lives and conundrums as it is in the life of our faith. Years ago, I stood in the kitchen of a family friend who had been like a second mother to
me, helping to chop potatoes for a holiday meal, and listened to her talk about her marriage. It had recently come out that her husband had been, for years, engaging in affairs all across the country, to the point of maintaining other homes and, seemingly, entirely other lives. She was bereft. Shocked. Enraged. But mostly she was heartbroken and deeply betrayed. She loved this man. She had raised children with him, had shared a life, had trusted him. And now he was repentant, willing to do anything to save their marriage, and she just didn’t know what to do.

I listened patiently, somewhat surprised that she was sharing all this with me – maybe she was, too – and then I put my knife down and turned to her, and we had our first real, adult conversation. And I asked questions. And she cried. And after a while I said something along the lines of, “well, it seems to me like there are times when leaving is the right thing to do, and times when staying is the right thing to do. I don’t think the point is for you to figure out the one right way forward but to figure out what the right way forward is for you right here, right now. And it sounds like you don’t know yet. And that’s OK. I just hope you’ll be gentle with yourself and ask for as much help as you need as you figure it out.” There’s not much I said or did when I was twenty-two that I think of as particularly wise, but I’m still pretty sure this was right on. And my friend looked so relieved to know she didn’t have to answer once and for all the question of how to mend or end a marriage after adultery, but only how to live in her life right then and there, exactly as it was.

So, God, in God’s infinite goodness and grace, calls to us in love, invites us up and out, laying before us a wealth of possible ways forward, and invites us to step out in hope. The way before us might call for courage and conviction and clarity. It might be hard. It also might be exactly what we have been hoping, praying, begging for – a welcome relief, a way we hadn’t let ourselves dream might unfold. Perhaps we’ll be called to stay. Perhaps we’ll be called to go. Perhaps, like Francis, we’ll be called out of the building but not out of the Church, out of convention but not out of tradition, out of our suffering but not out of our situation. No matter how it looks to those outside, all the paths lead to the same place. So listen. Stay open. Get curious. God is calling each of us – today, right now. How will we respond? Amen.