

Frank Chicken Shoe was not a particularly holy man. He was not even what most would think of as an upstanding citizen. He was not an advocate for the poor or a man of deep wisdom. But for a few years of my childhood, he was a saint.

Frank was a Blackfoot Indian who had several acres down the side of the mountain where we lived when I was a boy. I couldn't tell you how old Frank was. He seemed to be made of tanned buffalo hide, so he always looked like an old man to me. He had four or five abandoned school portables set randomly around his land. He lived in one of them. Most of the other buildings were going back to nature, including one that had an elderberry tree growing up and out a window.

Frank had removed the side of another portable so that it was like a garage with no door where he kept an impressive pile of car parts, tools and fluids. Whenever I walked through our cornfield to go visit Frank, that's where he was. I can't recall if Frank ever actually had a job, but he was always working on a car or two. He was always there when I needed him. And I needed him a lot.

You see, my mother had a narcissistic personality disorder that caused her to slip into unpredictable rages that were often quite violent. I have memories from when I was about four or five of my mother taking after me with wooden spoons or rulers, or rubber kitchen spatulas. She also had a couple of stiff-bristled hair brushes that she reserved for expressing her deepest anger.

I learned to get between her and my younger sisters so that she wouldn't hit them. But I also learned to go see Frank Chicken Shoe once I knew my sisters were going to be alright.

He rarely spoke or looked at me as I walked up. Instead, he usually just gestured to the driver's seat of the car he was working on. His specialty was small, open-frame dirt-track cars and so even sitting behind the wheel, I was close enough to see what he was doing. I would sit for a bit and then Frank would push his thick glasses up on his head, light up one of his hand-rolled cigarettes and smile. His tobacco-stained fingers were perpetually covered in grease and gasoline, and seeing fire that close to him made me a little nervous.

Eventually, Frank's calm quietness made it seem like everything was going to be O.K., and then, we talked. Frank never once asked me about my mother, but he did tell stories about people and about God. And, though he never said the words, he made sure I understood that he cared about me. In fact, I can't

remember a single detail that Frank ever *said* to me, but I can tell you that he *did* something I won't ever forget. He showed me about God.

Frank never judged me, never tried to fix me, never tried to talk me out of my feelings. I never had to complain or explain or impress him. He just welcomed me with an open heart and gave me his time. Frank's leaking, rusty cars were a safe place for me to begin seeing something larger than my life. To begin to see a place for me and to see hope. To catch a glimpse of the love of God.

That's why, when I hear Luke's Jesus saying: "Blessed are you who are poor; for yours is the kingdom of God," I can't help but remember St. Frank Chicken Shoe with deep affection and gratitude. St. Frank's poverty made it clear to him that we are all dependent on God. Frank was so poor in material goods that there was almost nothing standing between him and God. But he experienced God more directly among his decaying buildings and dripping cars than some people do who live in mansions. And God made the kingdom of heaven absolutely shine through Frank's gap-toothed, nicotine-stained smile. God made heaven radiate from arms covered with axle grease and prison tattoos to soothe the heart and soul of a confused little boy.

See, Luke's Jesus is not prescribing a set of behaviors here that will earn us a place in the kingdom of heaven someday. Jesus didn't say: "God will bless you if you will just go hungry more often" or "God will bless you if you would just weep more." Listen again: "Blessed are you who are poor, for *yours* is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry *now*, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep *now*, for you will laugh."

Luke's Jesus is describing God's kingdom and telling us where we can most readily see it *right now*. God is present *right now* in people and places that we might not expect. We will always find God with people on the margins of society, with people who do not have enough, with people who are grieving or protesting injustice. And if we can't *find* "those" people, no worries...we will *become* "those" people at some point. If you and I are full *now*, we will be hungry. If we are laughing *now*, someday we will mourn and weep.

And when that happens, God will be there with us, because that's the promise of God's kingdom. Someday, the kingdom will be here in its fullest glory, but until then, we can always find God in abandoned places like Frank's school portables and in the despair of children in pain.

And the people who show us the mystery of God's presence in broken places are saints. God's light shines through the cracks in their lives to illuminate for us what *they* see of God's kingdom now. There are saints among the poor, saints who hunger and thirst, and saints weeping and protesting injustice. There are, of course, also a few saints among people with money, saints who have access to resources, and saints who are joyful.

What they all have in common is not their life circumstances, but their response to God's presence in their lives. They give and they serve, not because that behavior earns them anything, but because they look to God and experience the loving light of the Risen Christ. That same light shines through them into the lives of others.

In a few minutes, we will renew our baptismal vows as a reminder that God has chosen, named and sanctified *us* to be the cracked and imperfect vessels through which the light of God's kingdom can shine. Every person who has ever lived or whoever will live is a potential saint in the eyes of God. But sainthood is not about achieving our own perfection. Sainthood is about receiving and passing along God's perfection now, in this life, until the day we are passed along into the light itself.

That's why the prayer we say in the ritual for Burial of the Dead is the same for the virtuous as it is for us reprobates. "Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you," the priest will say, "a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming." And then the priest will pray that God will receive us into the arms of God's mercy and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

Theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote: "In his holy flirtation with the world, God sometimes drops a handkerchief. Those handkerchiefs are called saints." A few of the handkerchiefs that God drops are like St. Frances of Assisi—easy to accept as a holy person. But most are like St. Frank of the Blackfoot.

People like you and me, that is, who are handkerchiefs with a few holes worn into us and more than a little schmutz on us. People who have weathered terrible storms and seen marvelous sights, who have tasted joy and agony, who have kept some promises and broken others. Some have broken laws and some have broken hearts. All have sinned and all have been forgiven. And all, in their own unique way, have been beacons of the light of God's love for all creation.

The sheer over-abundance of saintly evidence for God's inbreaking kingdom is *one* reason that the Church celebrates the feast day of All Saints. We express our gratitude for saints living and dead: kings and queens; soldiers, both men and women; slaves, prostitutes, farmers and merchants. Some non-descript, some astonishing. Some a little self-promoting and others a little self-critical. They have each provided a different space to encounter the holy love of God, often in unexpected places or at surprising times. Even one saint of a sinner who offered the grease-stained seats of crippled cars to a small boy on a Montana mountainside.

Another reason we celebrate All Saints is because the dawning light of God's holy kingdom shines, *right now*, in your life and mine. God is at work today transfiguring our lives, forgiving our missteps, and sending us back out, renewed, into the world. By the Spirit of the living Christ, we, too, are becoming saints who embody God's justice and love and mercy.

And as we do, in the words of our closing hymn: "...a new creation comes to life and grows as Christ's new body takes on flesh and blood. The universe restored and whole will sing: Alleluia!"

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Works consulted:

Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1993.