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# CHASING FRANCIS

A PILGRIM'S TALE

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Wouldn't it be a tarnished, limping lover of God like Maggie? Wouldn't they choose the foolish to teach the wise? It was lunacy, but there was also something poetic about it.

"Well," I said, "I'll do what I can. But after Sunday, I may be out of a job. I may be standing on a street corner wearing a cardboard sign: 'Will preach for food.'"

She laughed, then paused. "Well, one thing won't change." She pointed her fork at me. "Wherever you go, I'm going too."

Those six words jettisoned us across a border into a new and fearful land. Our fates were now intertwined.

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Chip's sermon that morning was titled "Church Next." He had the pulpit—and he used it to present his thoughts about where Putnam Hill should be heading. It came as no surprise that the proposal he'd given to the elders had by that time made its way into the hands of most everybody in the congregation.

The bylaws stated that only members were allowed to attend all-church meetings. After the morning service more than seven hundred of them stayed—an impressive turnout. When Maggie and I walked in, it felt like a scene from an old John Ford Western. I was the sheriff walking into Kitty's Saloon to confront the local bad guy. I knew, however, that a good number of people didn't think of me as the guy wearing the white hat. The crowds parted as we made our way down the aisle. A few people hugged me; others looked at the floor and shyly said hello. Some turned away and refused to say anything to me at all.

Ed met us at the front of the auditorium and shook my hand. "Ready?" he asked.

I nodded. Maggie and I took seats in the front row. Ed opened in prayer, then said, "On Monday night, the elders met with Chase and decided he should have the opportunity to talk about what he's learned over the last two months and share the direction

he thinks our church should be moving. After he's done speaking, the elders will take questions, and then we'll ask for a show of hands to determine whether the church still has confidence in Chase's leadership. I should remind you, however, that the decision to keep or dismiss a senior pastor rests with the elders. We're only asking for a show of hands so we can know your opinions. Chase, I'll turn it over to you."

I walked up and faced the congregation, recalling what had happened the last time I stood there. The first person I saw was Dr. Mac, standing against the wall in the back of the room. He wasn't a member of the church, but he'd snuck in just as the meeting began. It was nice to know that my shrink was in the house. He would come in handy if I had a second psychotic episode. He smiled and gave me a thumbs-up.

I took a deep breath. "Years ago in Silesia, they built pulpits in the shape of a whale standing on its tail. In order to get to the dais, the pastor climbed a ladder through the whale's body until he emerged in the opening that represented its mouth, and from there he'd preach his sermon. The implication was that a pastor didn't have the right to preach until he'd spent some time wrestling with God, like Jonah did. Over the last two months, I've spent a lot of time in the whale's belly, and I hope that has given me the right to share with you the things that are on my heart. I'm trusting you won't spit me out on a beach when I'm done."

A few people chuckled, but the overall response wasn't reassuring. I was taking my clothes off one article at a time before a mostly unsympathetic room. Telling a nervous joke was something you did to distract your audience while you fiddled with a stuck zipper.

"I know the last time you all saw me, my personal stuff ended up causing many of you a lot of pain, and I'm truly sorry for that. I'm praying that God will use my mistakes to take Putnam Hill to a place we couldn't have gotten any other way."

I looked at Chip, sitting three rows from the front. He was trying to look impassive, but I knew he was nervous; this was a winner-take-all contest.

"I went on a pilgrimage—a spiritual journey—to find out what it meant to be a Christian, what it means to be the church, and to decide if I wanted to stay on that journey. In Italy, I found a mentor named Saint Francis of Assisi, who taught me that the church of the future needs to listen to the church of the past."

Bill Archer whistled quietly and snickered, while others turned and whispered to nodding neighbors. I could only imagine what they were saying. I felt prickly heat crawling up my neck.

"Look, I know Francis has been dead for eight hundred years, but try—"

"Saint Francis is Catholic," someone grumbled. It was Beatrice Connerly, one of the few elderly members we had at Putnam Hill. She was hard of hearing, and though I'm sure she thought her remark was barely audible, she might as well have used a bullhorn.

I swallowed hard and continued. "When I left here, I wasn't sure what a Christian looked like anymore. My idea of what it meant to follow Jesus had run out of gas. I started feeling less like a pastor and more like a salesman of a consumerized Jesus I didn't believe in. Learning about Francis helped me fall in love with Jesus again—and with the church again too."

I took another deep breath, looked at Maggie's shining face for affirmation, and held up my notes. "If nothing else, I want you to leave here this morning remembering five words: *transcendence*, *community*, *beauty*, *dignity*, and *meaning*. The kind of church I think can impact the world, and the type of church I want to lead, will be passionate about those ideals. This isn't a business plan, and it definitely won't be the next big trend in church growth," I said. "But if my journey taught me anything, it's that there aren't any simple formulas for being the church or following Christ—and

anyone who tells you there are may be well-meaning, but they're out of touch with reality," I said, looking directly at Chip.

I put my notes on the podium, paused, and closed my eyes. This was it. I took a deep breath and looked up.

"The first word is *transcendence*," I said. "Since its beginning, Putnam Hill has tried to win people to faith principally by appealing to their intellects. Our assumption has been that the only true access to the soul is through the head, so our efforts to lead people to faith have focused on convincing their minds rather than captivating or romancing their hearts. From what I learned about the change Francis made in the church, he wouldn't have taken this approach. He was wary of scholars who wanted to talk about doctrines or abstract theological polemics in order to bring people to faith. He warned academics that knowing a lot *about* God could fool people into thinking they actually *knew* God, and there was a big, big difference between the two.

"Francis believed transcendent encounters with Jesus were the key to people's coming to faith. Opening our ears to God's voice in creation, being touched by the Spirit's presence in the community of believers, walking in solidarity with the poor, practicing contemplative prayer and meditation, saying the liturgy, and meeting Jesus in symbol-rich spaces and events like Communion—all of these are vital experiences that can act as portals into the life of God. If we want people to discover faith, we can't afford to ignore any of them. Francis understood this. He lived in an era when theology and knowledge were becoming the centerpieces of faith. Universities were being birthed across the known world. Scholars were organizing and codifying religious ideas into more rational systems of belief. But Francis cried out, 'Knowledge and theory are not sufficient! Encounter God! Encounter!' Just when the church was on the verge of collapse, that voice reawakened Europe's faith. We need to learn from him.

"All my life, I've been afraid to meet God anywhere else but in

my head. Up here," I said, pointing to my temple, "I could keep God manageable and under control. But what kind of God can be controlled or managed? No God at all," I said, shaking my head.

"To create faith-producing moments, we need to reacquire some of the practices and attitudes Francis did. We also need to learn from other Christian traditions that emphasize different ways of encountering God, and integrate the best of their practices into the life of our church. No, we're not going to abandon theology," I said. "But the days when we could rely only on rational argument as the entry point to a relationship with God are fading fast." The room was oddly quiet, as if there were an invisible membrane that separated me from the congregation. The unnatural hush was sucking me into the vortex of a full-blown panic attack. I shot a quick look at both Maggie and Mac and took a deep breath.

"The second word is *community*," I said. "Francis's vision of Christian community was pretty revolutionary for the times he lived in. He encouraged women to be in ministry and to follow his way of life. Women like Clare were his closest friends. He defied hundreds of years of church tradition by insisting members of his order live among the people instead of behind monastery walls. They didn't make artificial distinctions between the sacred and the secular. Instead, they went into the marketplace to minister. Francis and his other leaders saw their role as serving the members of the order rather than the other way around. As communities, they stood together against violence and injustice.

"The point I'm trying to make is that Francis focused on making his communities signs of the kingdom, the new Jerusalem. After spending a few weeks living with a bunch of Franciscans, I realized that we've been more about programs than about community here at Purnam Hill. We've been more of an organization, with me as the CEO, than an organism, an expression of Jesus on earth."

I looked up, saw the worry on Maggie's face, and knew I was in trouble. I'd been reading off my notes rather than interacting with the congregation. A seminar on the Death Tax Code would have been more scintillating. Those who weren't hostile were confused. I was losing them.

I took a deep breath, put my notes behind my back, and began to wing it. "OK, let's talk about what a genuine kingdom community looks like," I said. "First, if Francis were around today, he'd say our church community relies too much on words to tell others about our faith. For Francis, the gathered community was as potent a form of witness as words. He was convinced that how we live together is what attracts people to faith. Rather than loading people up with books and words when they come seeking God, why don't we just invite them into the community and say, 'We're all seeking God together—come join us. See how we relate to each other, to you, to the world. Experience God in our midst, and figure out if you want to be part of his family and what he's doing in the world.' It's all about actions first, words second."

*A little better, but not much*, I thought, watching the reactions on the faces before me. If Maggie had been up there with me, she at least would keep their attention. *And how would she do that? I wondered. What would she say about community? She'd push the envelope.* "So, actions first, words second." I gulped. "Let's talk about our community and money."

You can always tell the natives from the transplants in New England. If you raise the subject of money, members of the old guard take on a very pained expression, as if you'd just put a container of used kitty litter under their noses. It's simply not good form to talk about m-o-n-e-y in Thackeray.

"Compared to the rest of the world, most of us are stunningly wealthy. What would someone who didn't go to church say if they drove by our parking lot on Sundays and saw the kinds of cars we drive—that we were on the consumerism gerbil wheel like

everybody else? Things weren't much different in Francis's day. He faced having to do ministry in the same kind of materialistic environment that we do. Although the wealthy elite existed even before the time of Christ, conspicuous consumption was born in the thirteenth century. It was the first time in history that ordinary people had disposable income. Sadly, one of the most materialist institutions of all was the church. Regular people had a hard time taking Christianity seriously because the church had so much but shared so little. One of the reasons Francis inspired a revival across Europe was because he completely rejected consumerism and materialism. He'd got off the gerbil wheel. He gave up his wealth, which was considerable, and sometimes the shirt off his back to let others know that Jesus really was enough. Amazingly, his order was filled with aristocrats who followed his lead. Their sacrifice restored people's confidence in the gospel, and it shamed the institutional church.

"I'm not saying we should sell everything we have and give it to the poor. I'm saying that our materialistic society won't take us seriously as long as we're living with the same 'I shop; therefore I am' lifestyle.

"Francis taught me that if we spent less time worrying about how to share our faith with someone on an airplane and more time thinking about how to live radically generous lives, more people would start taking our message seriously. We'd have to make a new parking lot to handle the crowds who'd come to see the crazy rich folks who gave so much away to the poor. Radical? Maybe. But that's how the church's economy worked when the church first began." I was encouraged to see a few heads nodded approvingly.

"Over the last two years, we've raised five million dollars to beef up our endowment and build a new gym. It's funny, but Francis prohibited members of his order from touching money or having buildings. He was afraid it would lead to their getting too

comfortable, too insulated from the world. I'm not saying money or buildings are all bad, but I'm wondering if at this point in our church's history, we're confusing preferences and need."

I looked over at Peter Collins, the kindly pediatrician who was also one of my elders. "Pete, remember the night we sat on your deck and you told me how you dreamed about starting an inner-city health clinic for the poor on the south side of Bridgewater?"

Looking surprised, Peter nodded.

"Given the choice between putting our money into a basketball court or a health clinic, which do you think Jesus would tell us to choose?" I asked.

Peter grinned.

"I need to repent of my collaborating with the powers of materialism. I'm the worst of all sinners on that score. But if you take me back, I'm going to lead us all into a close examination of how we as a church are participating in the culture of consumerism. It won't be fun, but we need to think about whether our community's economics are aligned with the purposes of God's kingdom.

"Here's something else I learned—the kingdom community is a community of peacemakers. Francis told his friars to greet everyone they met by saying, 'The peace of the Lord be upon you,' which more often than not got them roughed up," I said, chuckling. "Thirteenth-century Europe was a violent place. There was always a war raging somewhere nearby, cities were filled with crime, disease killed people off right and left, and most of the roads were too dangerous to travel. The last thing people believed was that the Lord, or anybody else, could give them peace—and yet spreading peace is one of the most important ways a community can witness to the gospel."

I started to pace back and forth like a tiger in a cage, concentrating with all my might on keeping my mind clear. I was pushing hot buttons now, and I knew that some in the congregation would disagree violently with what I was about to say.

“The times we live in demand that we be more than peace lovers. The stakes are too high. As a community, we have to start being proactive peacemakers in our homes, our offices, our church—and, most importantly, in our world.”

I shook my head. “Sometimes when I read Christian magazines or hear Christian leaders, it’s downright scary. Liberals scream at conservatives, Republicans yell at Democrats, evangelicals berate revisionists, fundamentalists rail at everybody. It’s like ‘talk radio’ Christianity—everyone believes they own the Truth and have a God-given mandate to shove it down others’ throats. I admit it,” I said, raising my hand, “I’ve even encouraged this kind of ‘us versus them’ spirit around here. I’ve even preached it, and I was wrong. Sure, we can disagree with others and sometimes we should—but whatever happened to gentleness and respect?”

I scratched my head and looked around. “When the church first began, it was a pacifistic movement known for its outspoken criticism of any form of bloodshed or violence. After Constantine legalized Christianity, ‘just war’ theory emerged, which meant that Christians could participate in wars if certain criteria were satisfied. By the year 1100, Christians were launching Crusades and telling the faithful that killing Muslims would secure them a spot in heaven! What happened? Somewhere along the way we forgot that Jesus intended the Sermon on the Mount to be an actual, concrete program for living. He wanted us to actually live it, not just admire it as a nice but unrealistic ideal. I mean, what would happen if Christians dedicated themselves to peacemaking with the same discipline and focus that armies do for war? What difference could it make? We have to revisit the early church’s teachings about reconciliation, peacemaking, and the Sermon on the Mount and ask ourselves if we’re living them out or tiptoeing around them.”

The Marksteads and Dreisers stood up at the same time. Bill Markstead’s face was purple, and his wife patted him on the back

to keep him moving toward the exit. I think she was afraid he’d stand in the aisle and start a political debate with me if she didn’t get him out. The Dreisers were in no such hurry. They made a few stops en route to the door to let their feelings be known. I saw their arms waving; a few times they gestured in my direction and shook their heads.

“One last point about being a community of peacemakers,” I said. The Marksteads and the Dreisers paused at the doors to listen to me finish my thought. “I’m not a politician, and I’m not an expert on current affairs. But I learned in Italy that Christians are called to urge their leaders to be peacemakers too. This is one reason the church has to guard against holding up one political party as ‘the Christian party.’ History has proven that over-identifying with one party is a recipe for disaster. If we get too cozy with one group, we’ll lose our ability to criticize them prophetically if they go off the rails.”

The sound of the Marksteads and the Dreisers slamming the doors behind them made a few people jump.

Before the meeting, someone had opened the acoustic drapes. Shafts of noonday sun were shining down from near the ceiling line. The room was getting hotter, and I couldn’t tell if the sweat on my forehead was a response to the rising temperature or a symptom of abject terror. I turned away from the congregation to wipe my forehead with my shirtsleeve.

“Francis’s radical commitment to peace was another reason the church experienced a revival in Europe. I think it could have the same effect today. I’d like us to form a peace and reconciliation team to work with our missions committee to examine ways we can get involved in actively advancing peace locally and globally. How can we help combat unjust economic and political conditions around the world that create breeding grounds for violence and terrorism? Are there ways we can participate in reconciliation efforts between people groups in our country and abroad? How

do we actively seek to apply Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount both here and globally?

"I wish I knew more about the arts," I said. "But I do know this: *Beauty* can break a heart and make it think about something more spiritual than the mindless routine we go through day after day to get by. Francis was a singer, a poet, an actor. He knew that the imagination was a stealth way into people's souls, a way to get all of us to think about God. For him, beauty was its own apologetic. That's why a church should care about the arts. They inspire all of us to think about the eternal.

"I wish I could have taken each one of you with me to Italy," I said, surprising myself when I realized I meant it. "I wish you could have experienced with me the way architecture and painting and sculpture and music all led me into the presence of God. I'm beginning to see that there's a difference between art that trusts beauty's simple power to point people to God and Christian art that's consciously propagandistic. My Uncle Kenny, with whom I spent most of my time in Italy, said something profound—that you can make art about the Light, or you can make art that shows what the Light reveals about the world. I think the latter is what we want to do. In a fallen world, beauty is a form of protest, a way to push back the darkness.

"Up to now, we've halfheartedly embraced the arts like they were nice but not necessary. I'd like to change that. What if we transformed our fellowship hall into a dedicated space for art exhibitions and live performances—built a stage in it for poetry readings, dance recitals, and plays? I want us to sponsor film series. Most of all, I'd like to create forums where we and our friends come to discuss the relationship between beauty, art, and faith and how all of it relates to our common search for God. We've been talking about hiring an associate pastor for evangelism, but I'd like us to consider hiring an 'artist in residence' instead. Let's give him or her freedom to make our church an outpost of beauty

and to make Putnam Hill a safe place for artists to practice their vocations."

There was so much more to say about beauty. But my instincts told me to move on.

"Whenever I think of the word *dignity*, I think of Maggie Harmon. Most of us remember when Maggie first came to Putnam Hill, broken and hurting and with no idea how to act around us. And frankly, many of us had no idea how to behave around her either. But we made a place for her.

"Putnam Hill gave Maggie and Iris faith. But we gave Maggie something else besides—we helped give her her *dignity* back.

"We're all broken people who've lost our dignity, in one way or another. Francis's whole life was about giving people their dignity back—poor people, lepers, people who were despised and rejected by society—the very people Jesus sought out to minister to. His commitment to restoring people's sense of their God-given value thrilled the hearts of cynics who had all but given up on believing that the gospel was good news to anyone. What if we all, as a church, decided to make one of our distinctives being restorers of people's dignity? Make no mistake—this is indeed a radical and dangerous idea. It would mean we have to take people in just as they are, and coaxing their dignity back can take a long time. It would mean throwing open the doors of our church to folks who may be different from us. We might not always be comfortable with what they believe or how they live, but our job isn't to condemn people for their mistakes but to redeem them. Our goal is to help them see the One whose healing touch can bring back their lost dignity.

"Making dignity one of our guiding ideals would mean more than hospitality. Much more. It would mean fighting against anything that robs people of their dignity—things like racism, sexism, addictions, injustice, and poverty, to name a few. In last night's paper, I read that the drug and alcohol rehab in Robbins

Township just lost its lease. It's the only day program in the area for addicts who can't afford inpatient treatment. If it closes, 150 addicts will be left without the help they need to stay clean. Why don't we provide them temporary space in our building until they get a new facility? Again, this is just a start—but if we get going, God will tell us what to do next."

I became aware that my field of vision was filled with hundreds of eyes the size of dinner plates, staring at me in shock. Thank God for the handful of people sitting on the edge of their seats, looking like they were catching the vision.

"And here's a role for the church that will surprise you—one we've forgotten for far too long: we've got to give creation its dignity back too. If Francis were around today, he'd wonder why we weren't leading the charge to repair and defend our wounded planet. The earth is God's, and his people ought to stand up for it. Francis saw the stamp of God on everything. We can't fix everything, but maybe we can find an area in town that's trashed and make it beautiful for God again. We could adopt an endangered species and lobby the government for its protection. There are Christian organizations that are working to protect the environment—why not put them on our missions budget and send teams to work with them? That may not be much, but again, it's a start."

Seven or eight more people gathered their belongings and left. One man handed a note to LeClerc as he passed him. I was disappointed, but on the other hand, it could easily have been worse. "The last word is *meaning*," I said. "People are meaning-seekers. We all want to be part of something that's larger than ourselves. Our world is filled with people who have no big story that makes sense of their lives, and they're hungry for it."

I went back to my notes. "My Uncle Kenny made me read an author named Wendell Berry. Here's what he says: 'The significance—and ultimately the quality—of the work we do is determined by our understanding of the story in which we are

taking part.' For years I thought of the Bible not as a story but as a black-and-white photograph, something you could use in a court of law to prove that our doctrines and propositions were rational and true. Talk about trivializing and holding back the beauty of the Bible! Now I see the Story more like a painting filled with glory, poetry, and even blurry lines. Paintings are trickier than photos. They're open to a wide variety of interpretation, depending on who's looking at them and the situations those viewers live in. Seeing the Bible this way could lead to things getting messy from time to time—but the Word is living, not static. Our job is to invite people to inhabit our story, to be part of what God's doing in history. And we don't need to feel constant pressure to defend it against its critics. Truth doesn't need defending. It is its own witness.

"So here's one last thing. The truth is, I don't want to be labeled an evangelical anymore. In fact I don't want to be labeled at all. Labels are misleading. They objectify people. They are a form of relational laziness. We think that if we can nail a person's label, we've got them all figured out and we don't need to spend time getting to know who they really are." I chuckled and shook my head. "People are always a lot more complicated than their labels."

I stopped and thought for a moment. "You know the story in the first chapter of John where Jesus is walking down the road, being followed by a couple disciples of John the Baptist? He turns to them and says, 'What do you want?' They say, 'Where are you staying?' Jesus replies, 'Come and see.'

"If someone insists on labeling me in the future, I'd like to be known as a 'come and see' Christian. If someone asks me what kind of church I belong to, I want to say, 'a come and see church.' Come and see how we love the poor; come and see how we give dignity back to those who've lost it or given it away; come and see how we encounter God through every practice at our disposal;



come and see how we love one another in community; come and see how we stand for peace and justice; come and see how we've been freed from consumerism and have become radically generous; come and see our passion for beauty; come and see how we defend the earth; come and see how we preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words. Come and see—and perhaps after a while, you'll decide to join us in the story we're living in."

I sighed. "The Middle Ages were different from the world we live in now, but Francis faced a lot of the same challenges we do. I think he can help guide us to our goal, because his goal was the same as ours—*servicing Jesus completely and unreservedly*. There's so much more to say about all of this. I don't have a five-year plan or strategy. All I've given you is a taste of the spirit of the church I want to lead. Now you'll have to figure out if that's the church you want to be."

The presentation had taken me about forty-five minutes. A few people clapped heartily; I saw some genuine enthusiasm on their faces. The rest gave an anemic round of polite golf applause. Ed got up from his seat and joined me in front, motioning to the rest of the elders. "I'll speak to you later," he whispered to me.

I headed down the center aisle. Maggie popped up and followed me. Halfway down the aisle, she grabbed my hand and squeezed it. I blanched when we hit the hallway outside the auditorium and she let out a war whoop.