A long, long time ago – 835 years ago to be exact – lived a young man whose inner light still burns brightly into our own time.

His name was Giovanni Francesco Bernardone, born to a wealthy Italian family in the year 1181.

We know him as Saint Francis of Assisi, and today we mark his feast day, and with good reason.

As a young man, Francis was popular with his friends. He served in the military, was a prisoner of war for a year, and when freed, he looked forward to a life of ease and wealth. But he fell ill, hovered close to death in a delirium for weeks.

When he emerged from his illness, he spoke of his profound awareness of God’s presence and blessings all around him and within him.

It struck him that purpose of life is giving – the giving of his whole self to everything, to even to the rocks and the stars of the universe.

Francis began to bless everything in his path – stones, trees, animals, winged birds and sea monsters, young and old, rich and poor, princes and paupers – everything and everyone.

This is why we bless our animals today. We show our gratitude for the blessings our animals give to us by returning our blessings to the animals.

As Francis blessed everything and everyone, he discovered that he had too much stuff. Too much clothing, too many possessions, too much junk. All of that had become a heavy yoke – a burden – to him, so he gave it away.

As he did so, he heard Jesus’s invitation deep within his soul to let nothing get in the way of feeling God’s blessings:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

By giving away everything, Francis found his burden lighter.

With his yoke lighter, Francis understood that his hands and his heart were the hands and heart of God in the world.

Francis especially had a vision to repair the church. He found an abandoned and dilapidated church at Assisi. He began repairing it, stone by stone.

Others soon joined him, and together they rebuilt the stone church.
As they worked, they discovered something else: Francis’ vision to repair the church was not just about building stonewalls, but was really about repairing the people inside the walls.

The burdens people carried, the hurts and wounds, were heavy stones. Francis and his friends repaired them, stone by stone.

We, too, are called to repair the Church.

We too are called care for all who are inside our walls – and to reach beyond our walls to help repair the world that is hurting and wounded, and very much in need of feeling God’s blessings.

The more I live, the more I am convinced that our purpose in life is giving.

We do this in our daily life and work; by how we rear our children, by how we spend time with friends and family, by how we give of our time to repair the world; and how we give our time to prayer and service to this church.

Lori and first came to this cathedral 30 years ago, and we were awestruck by how people here care for each other, and how people care in so many ways for those in the world beyond.

This cathedral knows how to spread the blessings within our walls and beyond.

Yesterday, it was my privilege to join a group of ministry leaders here at Trinity Cathedral for a day of conversation about what gives us joy, what we do well, what needs our attention, and what needs repair.

I was again awestruck by how much we do here to bring heaven to earth.

All of this is possible because we share the resources of our time, our talents and our money. It all adds up.

People sometimes ask me what is an appropriate financial gift to the church: Is there a set dollar amount?

No. Rather, think of your gift as a percentage of your income. The Episcopal Church has long supported the biblical standard of giving 10 percent of our income to the work of building God’s kingdom, called the tithe.

There is great wisdom in the concept of the tithe because it is about giving proportionally according to our means. No one is asked to give more than he or she can afford.

Many years ago, Lori and I made a pledge to ourselves that we would work our way to the tithe.

We started small, and moved up gradually, one year at a time.
As we did, we discovered not only a sense of accomplishment but a sense of freedom from being captive to our things.

We have been tithing for many years now. We give back 10 percent – before taxes – of what the church pays us.

We also give above that to other causes and organizations that are dear to our hearts – it gives us great joy to participate this way.

But I also know that the idea of giving away 10 percent sounds huge to some.

So let me suggest if you haven’t given before, start by giving 1 percent. Next year, work your way up to 2 percent, and so forth.

But if that sounds scary, let me pose this another way:

What if you lived on 90 percent of what you make and gave the rest away? Or start with living on 95 percent of what you make and give the rest away?

What could you do to bring heaven to earth by your giving to the causes that really pull at your heart? What joy might you experience?

To be sure, you might have to rearrange your life to live a little lighter – 10 percent lighter. Francis gave away 100 percent; giving away 10 percent ought to be a little easier.

Imagine the amazing things we could accomplish together with our giving?

That brings me full circle to this cathedral and its mission.

Soon you will be asked to make a financial pledge for the coming year. Not today, so relax.

You will be given a commitment card in a couple of weeks and asked to bring it back in November.

For now, I’d like you to pray and think about this. Talk with those you need to talk with. This is an important decision I am asking you to make. I get that. Take your time.

And please ask yourself:

What and who needs our prayers? Who needs our blessings? And what blessings can we share together by sharing what God has given us?

Prayer, blessings healing, giving – this was the life of Saint Francis. We, too, can live by giving. The yoke is easy and the burden is light when we share this life of giving together. AMEN.