

Trinity 17-being Feast of St. Francis

Eph. 4: 1-6

St. Lk. 14: 1-11

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Sometimes, on rare occasions, Murphy's Law takes a break and things seem naturally to fall into place. Today is one of those times. It is the 17th Sunday after the Trinity and it happens to fall on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, one of the Church's great figures and examples of service cloaked in a peculiar and complicated personality. We are familiar with romanticized images of him, which can be seen in gardens, around homes and churches, standing with a bird on his shoulder while surrounded by deer and other fauna. It is likely that such a visualization is taken from his great poem- Canticle to Brother Sun, from which we derive the hymn, "All Creatures of our God and King". He is attributed to having said a number of things that he likely never said— warm and fuzzy phrases that go well on posters, but, like all saints, he was a complex figure while having a singular vision of God which remained his guide. In his Rule he writes, "Friars should act as they preach". Having served as a soldier he was captured around 1202 and during the incarceration he came to a turning point in his life. It is on occasions of isolation, like we experience now, that a person may come to clarity about their life and what they most value. Francis heard a call to rebuild the Church and at first spent his time at St. Damiana physically reconstructing the facility, but finally came to understand that the Church was not the building, but the community formed by Christ. He came to see that his work was service and not self-glorification. This vision of his place in God's creation animated his life and relationships.

Our celebration of this saint and his witness to Christ is in multiple ways summed up in the last phrase from this morning's Gospel, "Whoever exalts themselves will be brought down, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted". To add to this alignment let us consider that the text from Ephesians is a commentary on this saying. So, the day, the Epistle, and the Gospel ring with consistency. If we can hear a summation of the message it could be put in this way; humility is coming to know our proper place in creation as God provides it, walking in and loving that place, and creating a community for others to find the same.

It is likely a major overstatement to suggest that the practice, let alone the consideration of humility is a burning topic of conversation or a matter of much concern in our era. Self-promotion and finding ways to be noticed is far more entertaining and ego-stroking, which a quick survey of the entertainment industry, advertising, and American political life will demonstrate! Ego centrality is something we get. The dilemma with that pathway is there is never quite a large enough ego supply to satiate our hunger, so it becomes a never-ending quest. Let us be clear about the Gospel's message and ourselves. Being humble, as Paul and Jesus suggest, is not about pious self-degradation or the attempt to negate the beauty of the human beings God has created us to be. It is not self-abuse or seeking more guilt. Humility is the freedom which comes from a clear sense that we do not have to battle with others to build ourselves up. It is discovering our God given place in the order of life, and then making that available to any who seek after the same acceptance we have been given. We call it community.

Perhaps it has already occurred to you that the word, community, is made up of 2 intertwining sets of letters. Comm and Unity. It is to have a common and shared sense of purpose and value

and inclusion. The word community is used now to describe every manner of gathering, even Facebook, where we have 1,000's of "friends", but very little intimacy. This is not what the Church is. We are a different kind of gathering in a far too often world of loneliness and isolation.

The writer of Ephesians calls his hearers to live a life worthy of the calling to be God's people. We might well find it strange that people who are gathered together as a church would need such a reminder. After all the phrase One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All seems to be crystal clear. The Wesley's hymn, The Church's One Foundation, is based on this text and affirmation. The point of this whole communication (there's that word again—community) is to remind us that our unity is not derived from our own status or gifts, but in the One who has created everything. We might well look at this lesson as a theological and faith-oriented version of what in physics is called the GUT—the Grand Unified Theory. In the world of science, it is the search for that one missing piece that will explain how everything hangs and works together. Why is it that the strong and weak nuclear forces interplay as they do? For us as the people of God, the Grand Unified Theory is God, who has made us in the divine image, renewed us through Baptism back from sin and self-absorption, placed us in a family where our strengths and weaknesses alike have a place in the scheme of creation, and allows us to be agents of such wondrous life and participation. Both our Lord and St. Paul urge us to be acutely mindful of this. Perhaps it is because any of us know how one individual, driven by self-interest and desire for power can create abject chaos and undermine the life and mission of a community. We need not look very far afield to see the destructive force of factionalism.

"I urge you to live in a manner worthy of your calling." What might that phrase mean? It is to act in a way that is consistent with who we are. And who are we? Let me make up a word to try and describe us—Christified! I know, there is no such word, but let's pretend for a moment there is. Is not our Baptism into Christ a matter of our being injected both by and into Christ and his life? And this is not for our own sakes but our being drawn into him means we are drawn toward maturity and wisdom, healing and love, in order to serve. This is indeed a different kind of community, and one that is sorely needed. The motto of the State of North Carolina is *Esse Quam Videri*, which is likely derived from Cicero. It means 'to be, rather than to seem', that is, to actually be something than to pretend it. The word integrity comes to mind. Our vocation is to live, to act, to behave in a way that is consistent with who we have been made to be, and God can use us in large or minute ways to alter the path of the world. In a time when trust is a rare commodity, the Church, following Francis' example, can be a precious gift to the world.

William Willimon, the former Dean of Duke Chapel, tells a story about a conversation between a father of one of his students and him during his campus ministry at Duke:

A while back I got a call from a parent, an upset, VERY upset parent. "I hold you personally responsible for this," he said. "Me?" I asked. The father was hot, upset because his graduate school-bound daughter had just informed him that she was going to chuck it all ("throw it all away" was the way the father described it) and go do mission work with the Presbyterians in Haiti.

"Isn't that absurd!" shouted the father. "A B.S. degree in mechanical engineering from Duke and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti."

"*Well, I doubt that she's received much training in the Engineering Department here for that kind of work, but she's probably a fast learner and will probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months,*" I said.

"Look," said the father, "this is no laughing matter. You are completely irresponsible to have encouraged here to do this. I hold you personally responsible." he said. "*Me? What have I done?*" "You, you ingratiated yourself with her, filled her head with all that religion stuff. She likes you, that's why she's doing this foolishness," he said.

"*Now look, buster,*" I said, struggling to keep my ministerial composure. "*Weren't you the one who had her baptized?*"

"Why, yes," he said.

"*And then, didn't you read her Bible stories, take her to Sunday school, let her go with the Presbyterian Youth Fellowship to ski in Vale?*"

"Well, yes, but."

"*Don't but me,*" I said. "*It's your fault that she believed all that stuff, that she's gone and thrown it all away on Jesus, not mine. You're the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me.*"

"But all we ever wanted her to be was a Presbyterian."

"***Sorry. You've messed up and made a disciple.***"

To be and not simply appear to be a disciple is what vocation is really about. To live as if the moniker-**child of God**-is really true, and then to ask, see, and do what that means as each new situation unfolds before us.

"I urge you to live a life worthy of the vocation to which you have been called." Amen+