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A Sermon for St. Francis of Assisi
October 4, 2020
The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 22, Year A

Psalm 19

Caeli enarrant

- 1 *The heavens declare the glory of God, **
and the firmament shows his handiwork.
- 2 *One day tells its tale to another, **
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
- 3 *Although they have no words or language, **
and their voices are not heard,
- 4 *Their sound has gone out into all lands, **
and their message to the ends of the world.
- 5 *In the deep has he set a pavilion for the sun; **
it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
it rejoices like a champion to run its course.
- 6 *It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens*
*and runs about to the end of it again; **
nothing is hidden from its burning heat.
- 7 *The law of the LORD is perfect*
*and revives the soul; **
the testimony of the LORD is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
- 8 *The statutes of the LORD are just*
*and rejoice the heart; **
the commandment of the LORD is clear
and gives light to the eyes.
- 9 *The fear of the LORD is clean*
*and endures for ever; **
the judgments of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
- 10 *More to be desired are they than gold,*
*more than much fine gold, **
sweeter far than honey,
than honey in the comb.
- 11 *By them also is your servant enlightened, **
and in keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 *Who can tell how often he offends? **
cleanse me from my secret faults.
- 13 *Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;*
*let them not get dominion over me; **
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.
- 14 *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my*
*heart be acceptable in your sight, **
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus said, "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'" So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:

*'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes?'*

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Today is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, one of the favorite saints of the church. He is remembered most often in services where we bless animals. Francis, the patron saint of house pets. Rather like a religious Dr. Doolittle. This is the domesticated version of Francis. He was, in fact, shocking not because he loved animals, but for his simplicity and humility. In his early life, he was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant and landowner near Assisi in Italy. He was captured in battle and spent quite a long time in prison before being ransomed by his father. On his way home, he encountered a leper. I don't know what happened in that moment. But Francis saw something of his

own life in the face of the leper, perhaps a moral conscience that he didn't know he had. Francis hugged and kissed the leper and later wrote about what he called an "indescribable freedom" in that moment. Francis, then in his early twenties, focused his life on God, prayer, and the church. He gave up everything of the life he'd had: money, wealth, prestige, and gave himself to God.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians today, Paul says that for the sake of Jesus, he suffered the loss of all things. After the loss, Paul came to regard all the things he didn't have any more as rubbish. He lost his life, but gained life in Jesus.

Listen to Jesus when he teaches us in today's parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants who gave him no produce from it. The vineyard did not produce fruits for the kingdom of God. Perhaps it gave fruits for the tenants. We aren't told. But it did not produce fruit for God. Ultimately, Jesus tells us, the vineyard will be taken away and given to tenants who produce the fruits of the kingdom and for the kingdom.

Francis saw, in the eyes and kiss of a leper, that his vineyard was not producing fruit for the kingdom of God. He had lived life producing fruit for himself, focused on his own needs, desires and pleasures. We remember him for what he gave up, and for what he gained. Francis gained a vision of the world as God sees it. He recognized the hand of God in all of creation: in the birds, the animals, the trees, and the rivers. He didn't regard these as things to dominate and use for his own benefit, he recognized them as created by God, and therefore to be cared for. He saw them with humility. Francis walked through life referring to brother fox, sister stream, brother snail, and sister robin. This wasn't just language of affection; it was language of humility. Francis recognized his place in creation, and he saw the radiance and face of God in the creation all around him.

We say that the psalms were written by David, but I think today's psalm could easily have been written by someone like Francis.

"The heavens declare the glory of God
the skies proclaim the work of God's hands"

Imagine for a moment looking out at the world and feeling this psalm through to your very bones. Francis gave up his life so that he could see this and live this every day. Simplicity, gratitude, and praise of God.

In these last few months, the church has given up many things. We've given up our buildings, our Eucharist, our routines. We've given up the things that gave us something back. This isn't just a hardship. God is in the midst of us, and in the midst of what is happening to us. This is also an opportunity. God is calling the church to something new. Calling us to be like Paul, and to be like Francis. This is a wonderful opportunity to examine our own vineyard and the fruits that we have been producing. In this odd and strange time, we have an opportunity to step back from the trappings of church, to follow Francis into simplicity and examine our heart. What is happening in our vineyard? What kind of tenants are we?

Once we can stop focusing on what we've lost and what we don't have, we can begin instead to develop the skill to see the world through Francis' eyes. Perhaps we'll recognize Jesus in places we never thought to see him, and in people we would have rejected, the lepers of today. Perhaps we'll

take the time to remove the trappings of what we've created for ourselves in our lives, and gain sight to recognize what God has created.

Stand outside with me today. Celebrate Francis, a man of simplicity and humility, who didn't think of himself as greater than any other thing in creation. Walk barefoot on the earth. Remember the heart of what it is to be church. Produce fruit worthy of the kingdom of God. Celebrate in your hearts. Join the creation in singing praises to God.

Heaven is declaring God's glory.
the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.
One day gushes the news to the next;
and one night informs the other what needs to be known.
Of course, there is no speech, no words –
their voices can't be heard—
but their sound extends throughout the world
their words reach the ends of the earth.
God has made a tent in heaven for the sun.

Revive your being.
Become wise.
Let your hearts be glad.
Give light to your eyes.¹

Let the words of our mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts
be pleasing to you
O Lord, our creator, our redeemer, and the giver of all life.

Amen.

¹ from the Common English Bible