

# Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Rev. Canon Lance Ousley

The Feast of St. Francis, the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 2, 2011

Isaiah 5:1-7, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

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## Feast of Gratitude

I want to thank you for the opportunity to come and be here with you all today. Your hospitality is overwhelming, really. Even though I am from Texas, I mean, you didn't have to go so far as to bring all the animals into church this morning to make me feel at home.

But I appreciate it more than you know.

Seriously, what a blessing it is to be here as we celebrate so boldly the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, his life and ministry, his stewardship of all creation.

He is one of my favorite saints and I think his life speaks so clearly to us today in so many ways that are important to the life of the Church and to each of us as Baptized Christians.

So since we are celebrating his Feast today I would like to use his life as a look at the Gospel and not just our text today, but the entirety of the Gospel.

Many of us know about Francis' life reforming the church in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He spent his ministry authenticating the Gospel to the world when the Church had seemed to have lost its way in this vital mission.

I think this is where his life most rubs up against our text today that Jesus uses to expose the waywardness of the religious leaders of his time and how they had not been the stewards of the blessings that God had called them to share with the world.

I will leave that for you to ponder later on your own, or even here as a community together. What I want to focus on today is Francis' conversion from entitlement to gratitude that we might be enlightened some to feast with Francis in this most sumptuous feast of Gratitude in God's kingdom.

So who was this Francis of Assisi? He was the son of a wealthy textile merchant whose clients included royalty from Italy to France that enjoyed the lavish, if not gluttonous, social lifestyle of the rich and famous with grand ideas of knighthood.

Francis was drawn to romance and power and pursued the "good life" partying and carousing with his wealthy cronies who dubbed him "King of the Revels." They often played pranks on the poor and outcast deriding them in the contrast of their poverty.

But Francis was also prone to idealism, which lead him to enlist to go to war as a knight in the papal army. But through a dream he returns to Assisi to hear God's plan for him.

It was there before the crucifix at the decaying Chapel of San Damiano where he hears God's voice say, "Francis, go and repair my house which as you can see is falling into ruin."

So it was that Francis sought to rebuild the church. But it was not until he was riding through the forest one day that he fully understood what God was calling him to do.

That day returning home from Rome, Francis, lost in daydreams of building the church, fails to hear the required bell warning him of contamination. So he rides up on a leper in the road.

Francis stops dead in his tracks frozen in a silent repulsed stare, remembering how he and his friends had ridiculed the lepers in their youth. His horse begins to paw at the ground below.

But then Francis is overcome with compassion as he gazes at the hungry eyes peering back at him in deep pain.

Francis, noticing the ragged hands of the leper that

were supposed to be covered with gloves, looks down upon his own fine leather riding gloves and begins to choke on the lump in his throat.

Risking infection, Francis dismounts his ride and runs to the leper compassionately embracing him offering himself as a living sacrifice lovingly to receive this person as a brother.

Francis was transformed by this experience. Francis, himself, found healing in the embrace he offered to the leper. The scales of death fell from Francis' blinded eyes and now he saw the suffering world anew.

Did you know that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, lepers still were being set apart - ostracized from their communities? Civil leaders even declared lepers legally dead and that they could confiscate the leper's property. Lepers were given bells to wear around their necks to warn others to beware that a leper was nearby. They were forced to cover their heads and to wrap their bodies with bandages like a corpse and cover their hands with gloves. These were the clothes of the grave. They were literally considered the living dead.

The Church, yes, the Church, had even developed a funeral rite for lepers, declaring them dead to the world and banishing them from society to live in a secluded leper colony.

There was a service performed by the priest with the whole parish taking part there at the sight of the newly designated leper's secluded hut. Part of the liturgy of *The Mass of Separation (of Lepers)* reads like this:

*I forbid you to ever enter a church, a monastery, a fair, a mill, a market or an assembly of people. I forbid you to leave your house unless dressed in your recognizable garb and also shod. I forbid you to wash your hands or to launder anything or to drink at any stream or fountain, unless using your own barrel or dipper. I forbid you to touch anything you buy or barter for, until it becomes your own. I forbid you to enter any tavern; and if you wish for wine, whether you buy it or it is given to you, have it funneled into your keg. I forbid you to share house with any woman but your wife. I command you, if accosted by anyone while traveling on a road, to set*

*yourself down-wind of them before you answer. I forbid you to enter any narrow passage, lest a passerby bump into you. I forbid you, wherever you go, to touch the rim or the rope of a well without donning your gloves. I forbid you to touch any child or give them anything. I forbid you to drink or eat from any vessel but your own.*

But Francis saw the vision of the kingdom of God as he embraced the leper and he offered all that he had giving up his wealth and all his material possessions to fulfill the purposes of Christ's mission and ministry, even living among the poor and leprous.

Nothing else was more important than this – this truly being the Church.

Francis' faith had healed him. Now he truly felt alive, like he had never felt alive before in the deadening emptiness of his self-gratification and material wealth. Like Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, Francis counted whatever he had, as insignificant in comparison to the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

Francis was transformed from a life of entitlement to a life of *gratitude*.

Overcome with joy, Francis just couldn't contain himself. He was overwhelmed with what Jesus had done for him, setting him free from his materialistic incarceration and he couldn't hold his story in.

Francis shared his story over and over to everyone he met, not only through his words but also through his life, serving the poor and being attentive to all God's creatures.

Remember, Francis is the one who gave us the charge, "Go out into all the world and preach the gospel, and use words, if necessary."

Francis was not to rebuild the church with stone and wood, but to re-establish the Church on the Chief Cornerstone that is Jesus Christ himself.

The church had co-opted the corporate culture of the world. It is possible that they had gone so far as to call the Baptized "volunteers," instead of ministers. Can you imagine that?

It was through Francis' new vision of the Church and what it meant for us to be the Church that he saw the inherent value of people and of all Creation and he sought to be a stewards of all things, to be an instrument of peace in the world.

The blessing of the animals is but a small but very important part of the gift of Francis' feast of Gratitude we have been given.

If we are called to take care of even the least of these creations of God, then how much more are we called in Christ's name to take care of each and every human being?

These callings are interconnected inextricably through the waters of Creation that flow even through our Baptismal font. And God has gifted us with this responsibility, just as God gifted Francis.

Francis invites us to come and share in this sumptuous feast of Gratitude at the Lord's Table with him.

The invitation is free. Christ has taken care of that for us. You see, Jesus wants us to experience the same joy that Francis beheld in his feast of Gratitude.

But Francis reminds us that if we are to experience the richness of the wine now, the sweetness of the milk and honey now, that we should join him in building the church on the chief Cornerstone of Jesus Christ through living and doing the ministry Jesus did in his earthly ministry, both as the Church and each of us, individually, as the Baptized.

The truth is we live in a hurting world. The need for healing is all around us. Really, we are all lepers of one sort or another.

We have all experienced being set apart - secluded, bullied, and even ostracized at some point in our lives. Some of this is at the hands of others. Sometimes it is through our own self destructive behavior, like Francis had done.

The pain can be deadening and steal our lives away causing us to be blind to the needs of the world around us.

We often are blinded by our pain unable to see the messianic vision, as we walk around like the living dead cut off from the life God intends for us.

But Jesus makes us well through our faith. And we live out our faith by realizing and acting upon the messianic vision in our own context, as Francis did in his world.

So we also each have a miraculous story to tell. We have emerged from our Baptismal waters charged with proclaiming the Gospel to all the world, blessing all of Creation living the feast of Gratitude every day.

Oh, and we are to use words, if necessary. *Amen.*