

October 4, 2020
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 26, Year A
Matthew 21:33-46
Feast Day of St. Francis/Blessing of the Animals
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Cornerstone

Francis of Assisi died on October 4, 1226. According to tradition, at the moment of his death, Francis cried out, “Welcome, Sister Death.” Because that is the day of his death, October 4th is the day that Francis is commemorated in the church.

As you probably know, Lutherans have a much narrower definition of saints than Roman Catholics do. We tend only to talk about saints in terms of those who shared Jesus’ ministry as his apostles or closest companions. We talk about St. Matthew or St. Andrew or St. Peter or St. Mary Magdalene. We don’t really talk about St. Francis. But we do recognize him as an important person in the church.

In our hymnals, the green Lutheran Book of Worship and Evangelical Lutheran Worship, the hymnal that we currently use or at least that we would be using if we were gathering together in our Sanctuary, there is a list of what are called “Lesser Festivals and Commemorations”. There are people from all over the world and from across the spectrum of Christianity who the church, including our church, recognizes as reformers and renewers of the church and world, people whose contributions to the well-being of the church and world, which were motivated by their Christian faith, stand as examples and models for future generations. They stand as people who

should be remembered and celebrated, as we recognize the way the Holy Spirit worked in them and through them and as we celebrate the way that God's grace was made manifest in their lives.

We remember those people in the church on the day of their deaths, if it is known, which is recognized as their "heavenly birthday." In our Sunday bulletins, when we were able to meet together in person, there was usually a page of those commemorations, people who would be commemorated throughout the coming week.

Francis of Assisi is one of those people who we commemorate in the Lutheran Church. His name is found on page 16 of Evangelical Lutheran Worship, on this date, October 4th. His entry says, "Francis of Assisi, renewer of the church, 1226."

In the bulletin that was emailed out earlier this week, you'll find a very brief biography of him. It says,

Born into the family of a wealthy merchant, Francis gave up his inheritance to serve poor people. He formed the Order of Friars Minor (called Franciscans), who took on poverty and the task of preaching "using words if necessary." Francis had a spirit of gratitude for all of God's creation. (Biography from Sundays and Seasons)

The list of things that I am not an expert on is a long one. One of those things is the life and ministry of St. Francis. But I did do some research into his life in preparation for this day, and I have to admit, I did not find what I thought that I might. I thought I might find an intense period of conflict between Francis and the church leaders of his time, because he was embracing

and modeling and different way of following Jesus than was the norm in his time or since. I thought that Francis might have been received in a way similar to the way that Jesus talked about being received by the religious leaders of his time in our gospel reading for today.

Today's parable follows immediately after Jesus' debate with the religious leaders that we heard about in last week's gospel reading, and after the parable that Jesus told in last week's gospel. That parable was about a son who said that he would go work in the vineyard and did not go, and another son who said that he would not go and do the work that his father had asked him to do but who ultimately, did go and do what he had been asked to do.

The words of Jesus that begin today's gospel reading "Listen to another parable" tell us that nothing had changed. Jesus was still in the Temple and his audience was still the religious leaders and anyone who was visiting the Temple or who worked in the Temple who might have stopped to listen to the religious debate that was going on in front of them, between Jesus and the chief priests and the elders.

The parable that Jesus told in our gospel reading for today was about people who had been left to be stewards, or tenants, of a vineyard leased to them by a landowner. They were allowed to live in the vineyard, to work it, and to keep a portion of its produce for themselves, but the bulk of the produce belonged to the owner of the vineyard.

The landowner sent his servants to collect his produce from the vineyard, but, instead, the tenants abused the servants of the landowner, beating one and killing two others. The landowner tried again, with some other servants, and the same thing happened.

Then the landowner decided to send his son assuming that his son would command the respect to of the tenants.

But it didn't turn out that way.

In a peculiar line of thought that tenants decided that if they killed the son, they would end up inheriting the vineyard. So that is what they did. They killed the son of the landowner.

Jesus let the religious leaders finish the story for him. He asked them, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" (Matthew 21:40).

Their answered confirmed that the tenants' reasoning that killing the son and heir of the landowner would lead to them inheriting the vineyard, was completely unsound. The religious leaders said that the tenants murder of the landowner's son should lead to their deaths. They said, "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." (Matthew 21:41).

Then Jesus reminded the religious leaders about a quote from Psalm 118:22, scripture that they would have known well. Jesus said, "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'?" (Matthew 21:42)

He also interpreted the parable for them telling them, essentially, that they were the wicked tenants in the vineyard, saying: "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." (Matthew 21:43).

Needless to say, the religious leaders who heard this parable and this scripture quotation used against them, were not pleased.

They wanted to arrest Jesus on the spot, but they were afraid about how the crowd might react, because they knew that the crowd believed Jesus to be a prophet.

Have you ever wondered why most of the religious leaders didn't listen to Jesus?

I say that most of the religious leaders didn't listen to Jesus, because the gospels and the book of Acts tell us about a few religious leaders who did listen to Jesus, who did try to give him a fair hearing, who even became his followers.

But for the most part, the religious leaders and even many of the religious people were offended by Jesus and they did not listen to him.

Why do you think that was?

I think that there was a power dynamic at play here. The religious leaders liked things just as they were. They were accountable to no one other than themselves and each other, and their moral compass tended to move together toward the thing that would benefit themselves the most. They weren't particularly interested in the good of the people. They bolstered their own power and moral superiority by looking down at the very people that Jesus tended to gather around him; people who knew that they were sinners, people who had been taught that they were beyond God's redemption and beneath God's notice.

If those people were lifted up, then the religious leaders and the people who had always played by the letter, though not always by the spirit of the law, would no longer have the illusion of the moral high ground. They would be made equals with those who they had always considered beneath them. And they didn't want that. They didn't want to have Jesus call into question

the things that they believed made them superior to others. And when he did, well, quite simply, it was time for him to go, so that things could get back to normal, so that the status quo that made them comfortable, where they were at the top, looking down in scorn, or sometimes pity at the poor sinners beneath them, was the way that they liked it.

Francis ministry could very well have caused the same kind of dynamic. Because he made central to his life, ministry, and order, following Jesus in the way of poverty and service. This lifestyle could very well have been perceived as a reproach to a church whose top leaders at the time lived like royalty in castles and palaces.

But there seemed to be no great conflict between Francis and the church leaders of his time.

He did have a bit of a tussle with his father when he first made the decision to turn his life around based on what he had experienced as a call from God. He heard the crucifix above the altar say to him, “Go, Francis, and repair my house, which you see, is well-nigh in ruins.” Francis’ father was a wealthy cloth merchant so Francis went, took cloth from his father’s stores, sold the cloth and his horse in a nearby town, and then went to the chapel outside of Assisi where he had had the vision and which was in disrepair, and tried to give the money to the priest who worked there. The priest would not accept the money so Francis threw it out of the window.

His father tracked him down because he had essentially, stolen the cloth from his father’s business, and because he was acting very strangely. He then brought Francis to the civil authorities and then before the bishop of Assisi. During that meeting, Francis stripped off all of his clothes, and said to

his father, “Until now I have called you my father on earth. But henceforth I can truly say, “Our father who art in heaven.”

I did not find his father’s reaction to this experience, this rejection. The bishop, clothed Francis and Francis went to live in the forest above the city where he heard a sermon that led him to making a formal renunciation of worldly things and dedicating himself to living in poverty, having no possessions, and serving the poor.

Two years later, he went to the Pope, who lived like royalty in Rome, to gain official sanction for his lifestyle and ministry, which was becoming a movement within the church.

The pope, Innocent III, was at first reluctant to sanction Francis’s rule of life, but he also had a dream, in which he saw Francis holding up a church. He gave his sanction to Francis’s movement and the Franciscan order was officially founded on April 16, 1210. It continues to this day.

We bless animals on this day and celebration creation, because, in addition to a focus on poverty and service, Francis had a very nature focused theology. He saw God’s glory reflected in the natural world, and claimed fellowship with all living things and with all of creation. He called the things of nature sisters and brothers, and lived in relationship with them.

A hymn which we will hear sung later in this service is based on Francis’s song, “Canticle of the Creatures” in which he invites creation to join him in praising God, calling upon, “brother sun, sister moon, brother wind, sister water, brother fire, mother earth, sister death, all people, and all creatures, all animal” to join the song of “Alleluia.”

Jesus was the cornerstone, the one who was rejected by the human builders, on whom God chose to build a new creation.

Francis's life, as a Roman Catholic, stands as an example to the whole church, and not just to Roman Catholics, simply because Francis chose to model his entire life around that cornerstone; the life and ministry of Jesus. He lived a life of service, of prayer, and of fellowship with all creation. He lived a life of risk in the poverty that he believed that his faithfulness to God called him to. He lived a life of trust that God would provide for him as he sought to love God by loving all whom he met, recognizing in them those for whom Christ had died.

When we seek to love and serve our neighbors, even the ones we struggle to understand as Francis did, when we seek to sacrifice worldly things so that we are better able to give and share with those who are in need, as Francis did; when we lift our voice in Francis's Canticle of the Creatures, when we used Francis's prayer to guide our own, we do so, seeking not to be like Francis, but to, like him, to model our lives on the life of Christ. We do so to build our lives on God's chosen cornerstone, so that we can experience the blessing of produce fruits of the Kingdom of God. Amen.