

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
16 Pentecost: (Proper 21-C) on September 29, 2019
by the Rt. Rev Gordon P. Scruton
Amos 6:1a, 4-7. Psalm 146. 1 Timothy 6:6-19. Luke 16:19-31

For the past 800 years people have been fascinated by the life of St Francis of Assisi. He has been admired by Catholics and Protestants, Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Buddhists, agnostics and atheists around the world. When you think about the life of St Francis, what characteristics of his life are most important to you?

Many people think first of his loving connections with animals whom he considered his friends and neighbors in God's creation. That's why we will have a blessing of Animals here at Trinity at 4 pm this afternoon.

Others think of his love of all creation, as we heard in his Canticle of the Sun which we sang as our opening hymn. The Ecumenical Church celebrates the Season of Creation at this time of the year so it can reach its culmination today, at the feast of St. Francis who is considered the patron saint of ecology.

Sometimes people focus on Francis as a peace maker, because of his constant work to bring reconciliation and peace in the midst of political conflicts during his lifetime. He is honored by both Christians and Muslims because of his trip to Jerusalem, during the Crusades, seeking to make peace with the Muslim Sultan through prayerful, respectful conversation, not violence. The prayer attributed to St Francis, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace", continues to be a profound inspiration to a peacemaking way of life for everyone who hears and uses it.

The Scripture readings this morning focus on a frequently neglected element in the life of Francis. One of his greatest passions was his deep sense that God had called him to embrace complete poverty as a life-giving priority. How did Francis become so passionate about a life of poverty?

One Sunday while Francis was worshipping in a church, he heard Jesus say in the Gospel for the day: "If you want to follow me, sell all that you have and give it to the poor. Then come and follow me." Instantly, Francis knew that God was calling him to take those words literally. He sold everything he had, gave it to the poor, and focused his entire life on joyfully following Jesus by living in humble poverty and caring for people most in need around him.

Another significant part of the Gospel for Francis was when Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount by saying, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Francis wanted to embrace the spiritual poverty Jesus spoke about so he could experience the blessings of God's Kingdom in his daily life. As he began to choose spiritual and physical poverty, he discovered at a new level BOTH how dependent he was on God AND how God actually provided for all his daily needs. Poverty opened him up to experience a deeper connection with God moment by moment and to a rich sense of joy and fulfillment through his increased awareness of God's beautiful and bountiful creation.

Having been raised in a wealthy middle-class family, Francis grew up knowing the pleasures of having money which provided him with expensive clothes, hobbies and toys and an extravagant party life with friends.

And, at the same time, young Francis also saw in his father, a successful cloth merchant, and in the other business men and families of Assisi, how their drive for more money and a better image in the community drove them to neglect their relationship with God and to focus on themselves, their pleasure and comfort...while neglecting the poor people who lived around them. He also saw that their focus on money blinded them to a deep appreciation for the daily gifts God gave for their enjoyment in the creation which surrounded them. He saw how the drive for more money and possessions increased the levels of frustration, stress, anger and violent conflict.

In contrast, Francis saw in Jesus, a man who lived humbly, in total dependence on his Heavenly Father. Jesus gave his life to loving and helping people, especially those who were poor and in need. His parables reflect his love for creation. Jesus was free to live with joy and peace because his deepest dependence, moment by moment, was rooted in God's loving presence and guidance. He was not driven by competition or a drive for human approval, comfort, money, power or control.

In the Gospel readings both last Sunday and today, Jesus tells stories about the dangers of wealth. In fact, the second most common topic Jesus talks about in the Gospels is money and material possessions. Jesus doesn't talk about money because he wanted people to give money to him. He talks about money because he sees that our attitude toward money shapes the way we relate with both God and our neighbors. Our attitude toward money either frees us for a life of love and joy, generosity and peace OR destroys us by making us addicted to relentlessly making ourselves the center, wanting more money and possessions, never feeling that we have enough.

Like Jesus, St. Paul also speaks about the dangers which come when we make the love of money and possessions the primary focus of our lives. In today's second reading, Paul tells his young associate, Timothy to focus on "godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it; if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

I've been privileged to see this quality of God-trusting gratitude and contentment in my Dad throughout his life, which has been filled with challenges. Now, at age 97, as he steadily declines toward his death, he still lives most of the time with gentle, grateful, joyful contentment, in the midst of his increasing pain and limitations. He continues to speak with loving generosity toward people around him.

Paul points out the value of a life which is rich in a trusting relationship with God which leads to joyful contentment, to constant gratitude for God's moment by moment gifts and blessings. Those who are always greedy for more financial gain will never experience this kind of contentment.

Through Paul's words to Timothy, God also invites you and me to focus more on trusting God's care for us and becoming more content with the realities and increasing limitations of our lives, in a spirit of gratitude and joyful love for others.

I hope you noticed that when Paul talked about the dangers of money, he never says that money is evil. It is the inappropriate love of and trust in money that leads to evil.

In fact, Paul speaks with loving care to us middle income and retired people who need money to live. Paul says, “For those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

What practical guidance Paul gives us, no matter what our income is. While Paul’s guidance is simple and clear, it is not easy to follow. We all need God’s constant help in keeping us focused on these priorities. The American Way of life and the incessant messages of advertising tell us that we always need to have and do more. American culture is often in direct opposition to the Jesus Way which Paul and Francis experienced. It is a daily challenge to keep asking God to show us proper priorities for how we use our time, energy and money. We will get it wrong often. But the Jesus Way, the way of Paul and Francis is to keep asking God to show us how to live with contentment, and with joyful, grateful, generous love for God, self and our neighbors in need. This is the way to life at its fullest and best.

Jesus, Paul and Francis were not trying to make us feel guilty about having money. They were inviting us to discover the joy and fulfillment of putting God and money, our needs and the needs of our poor neighbors in a proper perspective.

One of the things that brings me joy as a parishioner here at Trinity, is the many ways people of this parish are generous toward the needs of others, especially the poor in our area and around the world. We intentionally include BOTH giving money to people in need AND having face to face relationships with those we serve who are in need.

We are a community who follows the lead of Jesus, Paul and Francis and we find joy in giving generously to the needs of others. There is a reason that generous people are happier than stingy ones—God created us to love and serve our neighbors in need. It is through caring for others that we find a joy and fulfillment that no money can buy. I don’t know how you feel, but I look forward to discovering more ways in which God will invite me and us to share God’s loving generosity with our neighbors in need.

This week I invite you to take the Scripture insert home with you and to read Paul’s words to Timothy every morning. As you read over the Scripture, very simply ask Jesus to help you identify one little practical way he might want you to practice one aspect of this passage during the coming day.

And at the end of each day, I invite you to read this passage again, and ask Jesus to help you think back over the day...and help you see ways in which you actually put some of Paul’s words into practice in your life...and then also notice in what ways you might have failed to live the spirit of these words during day. Gently ask God’s forgiveness...and ask for fresh grace to live God’s guidance better tomorrow. Then fall asleep in peace, trusting in God’s love and care for you, for those you love and for the whole world.

Let’s close our eyes for a moment...in the silence, what do you sense God has been saying to you personally through the words of Jesus, Paul and Francis?...

Now ask Jesus to help you actually practice what God has made you aware of this morning by embracing these simple morning and evening exercises with Paul's words as often as possible this coming week...

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(BCP to page 833, # 62)