

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Celebration of St. Francis of Assisi – Year A – 10.01.20
Jeremiah 22:13-16, Psalm 148: 7-14, Galatians 6:14-18, Matthew 11: 25-30

Today we celebrate the life of St. Francis of Assisi. For most of us, Francis is our idea of a saint. The stories told about him are stories of goodness, of generosity, and of love, of people, animals and all creation. We admire Francis, or at least the picture of Francis that we see in stories told about him.

It was not always so. In words, imagined by author Lauren Dunlap, Francis tells his own story beginning with his early life, his wild ways, his adventure and his downfall. It was a time when Francis was at his lowest point that he heard the voice of God and changed. “This is how God breathed into me, Brother Francis, a new life.”

“When young, I loved what was lovable. My father was a rich cloth-seller and made sure I always dressed well and had money to spend. My friends were the sons of Assisi’s wealthy. No all were of noble birth, but all had noble bearing and each was nobly outfitted. They looked to me and I led the way. We ate as only those with the good appetite, good teeth, and good digestion of youth may eat. We danced. We drank and sang...”

I sought happiness in beauty and pleasures. I sought it in glory as well—I rode to war in a suit of armor and I returned from war and from a year in prison...unsuited and ill. Back with my friends, themselves returned from war, I again led the way. But I began to realize that I sought my happiness in wrong places.”

And so, Francis began to seek a new path, a new way of being in the world. “I saw the same sun and moon and stars that I had seen previously, the same olive trees on the hillsides, field poppies and larkspur, the sparrows, the dragonflies, the flocks of sheep---but now underlying and overlaying and shot through {was} their beauty.”

Francis began to see God in the beauty of creation which was all around him. It had always been there, but now he was able to slow down enough to really see the world around him. “...I began to seek beauty in the One who created my very apprehension of beauty. Even so I wavered. My knees would grow sore and my skin cold as I tried to pray through the night.”

Then God took a hand and turned Francis from looking inward for perfection, to looking outward to the imperfect world. Francis met a leper. “ You see,” says Francis, “ ...in my old life, I couldn’t stand the sight of lepers—could never even view their dwellings from less than two miles away and then had to pinch closed my nostrils.” Francis not only gave alms to the leper, all he had with him, but kissed the leper’s hand as well. This was the beginning of many adventures to which God called Francis, adventures that made him first human and then eventually a saint. But a saint not as someone uniformly perfect, rather a saint in the way we are all called to be, those who hear the voice of God and do it.

The change did not happen all at once, but over time, with a step forward and one or two back, but with steady progress toward seeing the world through the eyes of God. There are many stories and many adventures that are told of Francis, some of which are even true. I would like to share one such story with you today, because I think it speaks to St. Augustine’s-in-the-Woods where we find ourselves today.

Soon after Francis’ encounter with the leper, he was walking in the countryside and passed a small church near Assisi.

It was the church of San Damiano. As Francis tells the tale: “Not many stopped there any more as small bits of dislodged stone sometimes fell onto their praying heads and the chinks in the walls let in not only the wind but the rain. I stopped inside to pray.... Then I heard a voice speak

my name tenderly as a lover—Francis, go and repair my house.” You see it falling down.” Repair my house, build my church, God was calling to Francis to undertake what seemed like an impossible task.

Francis had no money for material to rebuild the church and yet, in his new-found faith Francis did not hesitate. He set out to acquire the means to rebuild the church. He first took goods from his father’s shop and taking his father’s horse he went to a nearby town and sold them both. Without permission. Then, Francis returned to San Damiano to give the money to the priest for the re-construction of the sanctuary. But the priest would not take the funds, badly as they were needed. The money was set on a high windowsill and left. Eventually, the taking of the goods and selling them led to the final break between Francis and his father. The money was returned. But Francis kept hearing the voice of God. Repair my house, build my church. As the story goes, Francis returned to San Damiano because he remembered that he still had work to do there. And so, he began to repair the house of God, by begging for stones, mortar, bricks and everything he needed to do the work he was convinced God had given him to do.

“Whoever gives me one stone will have one reward and two stones two rewards and for three stones a triple reward!” And so the little church of San Damiano was repaired. Repaired through the generosity, the giving of people who also heard God calling them to participate in building the church. Those who gave were blessed in being a part, not only of the repair of the church but of the repair of the Body of Christ in that place.

But of course that wasn’t the end of the story. There is a Spanish proverb, often attributed to St. Teresa of Avila. “God writes straight with crooked lines.” It proved to be the case with Francis. Once the small chapel of San Damiano was complete, Francis might have thought God was finished with him. This was not to be the case. Francis heard the voice of God again. The message was the same. “Repair my house, build my church.” And so Francis set out on what was to be his life’s work, preaching the gospel and drawing people to Christ and to ministry. The result is what we know as the Order of Franciscans today.

I said at the beginning that I wanted to tell this story because I believe it has much to say to us in the 21st century and specifically to us here in South Whidbey at St. Augustine’s. This is a story of conversion. Conversion from looking inward to looking out at the world through God’s eyes. The voice that Francis heard is the same message that God continually speaks, Build my Church, Repair my House.

God has a beautiful house here, in the woods, one that many who have gone before you have literally build. But there is more to building a church than bricks and stones, wood and glass important as those are.

St. Augustine is called now to build the church in a different way. To build it with ministry and people, with those who are frightened or lost, those who are lonely or new in the neighborhood. We are to build the church by seeking those who seek God and leading them to this place of peace and faith. We are called to build the church by inviting others to join us here in this place. Inviting others to come be converted as we continue to be converted that we may all see the world through the eyes of God. Listen carefully and you will hear the voice of God saying to you as well “Build my Church.”