



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 17 – Proper 22 Year C

An Act of Love

[RCL]: Lamentations 1:1-6; Lamentations 3:19-26 or Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.” This is according to G.K. Chesterton, who found Christians, including himself, did not put their faith into action. But even the curmudgeon Chesterton would agree there was a notable exception.

Francis of Assisi, the saint who launched a million birdbaths, hundreds of thousands of statues, and the occasional service of Blessing of the Animals was, for Chesterton, the one Christian who actually lived the Gospel.

Francis was the son of a wealthy textile merchant and as such part of the new Italian middle class that was coming into its own. His father’s wealth and Francis’ own natural charisma made the young man a leader of the youth of his town. Francis gained a rock-star like following by the early 1200’s. He remains famous today not because of his own words and actions so much as because his words and actions conformed so closely to those of Jesus.

As a boy Francis dreamed of earning glory in battle. He got his chance at an early age when he enlisted, along with the other young men of Assisi, to fight in a feud against a neighboring city-state. Assisi lost the battle and Francis was imprisoned for a time. Defeat in battle and serious illness in prison caused Francis to turn away from his visions of glory on the battlefield.

Francis’ path toward God took a series of turns closer and closer to God, rather than an all at once conversion. However, the course of Francis’ life was profoundly changed by at least two formative experiences. On a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis saw a beggar outside of St. Peter’s Church. The Holy Spirit moved him to trade places with the beggar. Francis exchanged clothes with a beggar and then spent the day begging for alms. That experience of being poor shook Francis to the core.

Later he confronted his own fears of leprosy by hugging a leper. Like trading places with the beggar in Rome, hugging a leper left a deep mark on Francis. Shaped by his experiences with the beggar and the leper, he had a strong identification with the poor. Francis cut himself off from the opulent lifestyle of his father and sought out a radically simple life.

By the time of his death, the love of God had compelled Francis to accomplish much toward rebuilding the church. He could look on thousands of lives transformed by his call for repentance and simplicity of life. Yet, Francis of Assisi was simply a man transformed by the love of God and the joy that flowed from a deep understanding of all that God has done for us.

Francis' approach to his life of Christian service fits with Jesus' words to us in today's Gospel reading when he tells those who follow him that they are to serve with no thought to reward. Jesus said, "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table?' Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink?'" Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"

So, when you come in from doing something for God, don't expect a reward, only more work. It's a wonder the crowds followed Jesus at all. But what exactly is the work of God? In what way are we to serve him? We have the example of Francis, to add to that of Jesus' own life and ministry. Yet, how can we in our own time and place attempt to live more fully into the Gospel?

First, there is no getting around the fact that the Bible knows nothing of professional clergy serving a congregation. The Bible teaches that all Christians are ministers of the Bible by virtue of their baptism. Then as ministers, each of us has a wide variety of jobs to do in the kingdom of God based on the gifts God has given us. While congregations benefit from the ministry of priests and deacons, the real work of the church happens when the people in the pews live out their faith in their day to day lives. This includes many thankless tasks, showing love and mercy in even small ways and even if no one notices.

You know how thankless these tasks are because you have the same issue at home. Do you get thanked every time you do the dishes? Or cut the grass? Or wash the laundry? Or make your bed? Or do your homework? Probably not. But permit time to pass without doing the dishes, cutting the grassing, washing the laundry, making your bed or doing your homework and you are sure to hear about it. These are thankless tasks and you take them on with no thought to getting praise for doing them.

Notice that in this Gospel reading, Jesus tells of the servant who does what he or she is supposed to do in response to the disciples asking for more faith. First he tells them the parable of the mustard seed and how the tiniest amount of faith is enough to accomplish great things for God. Then he goes on to describe the thankless task of serving God his Father. It is in serving God that we find our faith strengthened.

We are not to serve others for the thanks we get. We are to serve others as serving Jesus, because that is the life God calls us to, knowing that we will benefit more than the people we help. We will benefit in increased faith and increased love. Francis took his mustard seed of faith and used it to trust that he could hug a leper, though he was terribly afraid. In the process, he found the faith to work among lepers. And so,

again and again, his steps of faith emboldened Francis to trust God more. It is the same for us. Each step of faith strengthens our trust in God to follow even more boldly.

To come back around to G.K. Chesterton, he advised, “Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.” That was Francis, living out a love affair with God. When it is me and you living into the love of God, then Christianity will have been tried and not found wanting, nor will it be a series of thankless tasks.

Walking the life of faith then is not done in search of thanks or praise but is simply an act of love. Then you and I can join Francis in saying that we are merely servants doing what we were called to do. We call ourselves servants knowing that what we do, we do for love, for the one who knows us fully and loves us more than we could ever ask for or imagine.

This sermon, written by the Rev. Canon Frank Logue, originally ran October 1, 2016.

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