

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 3, 2021 – 19 Pentecost
Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8:7; St. Francis
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When we gather to worship on Sunday mornings, we hear several passages from the Bible. We believe that the Holy Spirit may speak to us through scripture, sometimes with the power to change our lives. But the Bible is a very complex collection of writings that are all ancient, from many times and from cultures very different from ours. Often we need more than the text itself to comprehend the message of scripture, the message that might be life-changing. We need information about when a passage was written, for whom it was written, what it meant to the people of the time. In the case of the Gospel, it often helps to know what was happening in the life and ministry of Jesus when he taught or did something in particular.

I take seriously my responsibility to provide you with some of what you need to understand the scripture lessons for the day. That being said, what a selection of passages I was given for today! You certainly don't want me to preach for half an hour, and it is impossible for me to tackle today's lessons in a few minutes. So, I have decided to short-change my treatment of the Gospel and Jesus' teaching about divorce (Mark 10:2-16). This is not because the topic of divorce is unimportant or irrelevant. Certainly, divorce has touched each of us in different ways. But the subject is complex. What I want to do is extend an invitation to you to talk with me personally about divorce if you would like to. It is probably more helpful to speak together about personal issues rather than for me to give general statements that might not be helpful, in fact, that might be hurtful. Will you think about talking with me if you are troubled?

What I want to do today is talk about our lesson from Genesis, mentioning a verse from Psalm 8 along the way, and then speak about St. Francis of Assisi. His feast day is tomorrow, and though we won't be doing a blessing of the animals this year, we do want to honor this saint and his love for God's creation and God's creatures.

There are two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis. We are most familiar with the first account (Genesis 1:1 – 2:3) which begins with the first verse of the first chapter of the book – “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...” This is the story of God creating day and night, the sky and seas, sun and moon, vegetation, the creatures who dwell in sea, sky, and land, and finally human beings – all in six days followed by the seventh day on which God rested. After each stage of creation we read, “and God saw that this was good.” The second account of creation is in the second chapter of Genesis (2:4b – 25). This story is centered on human beings and begins with the creation of man, whom God placed in the Garden of Eden, and then the creation of woman from man's rib. The account goes on from there with the famous story of The Fall. Our lesson today is part of this second story of creation.

In several branches of Christianity all the accounts of creation and many of the stories in scripture – such as the account of The Fall – are understood to be literally

true. In the Anglican and Episcopal tradition we do not generally approach scripture in this way. We believe that these stories convey truth without being literally true. They are myths, like the myths of other cultures and time periods. As you know, most cultures have a myth of creation. One of the things this means is that we don't have to choose between a scientific understanding of creation and a biblical understanding. The two understandings are each true in their own way.

What can we learn from the biblical account of creation? What has been accepted as theologically valid in our tradition? We believe that the created world is good and has value because it is the creation of God. God's creation is good, but it is not God. So, Christianity is world-affirming without being world-worshipping. Creation has a claim on us: it is God's, it is good, it is our home, and we are meant to both enjoy creation and be good stewards of creation. These are beliefs we hold about the created world.

In this morning's Psalm we find a difficult verse (Psalm 8:7), one that undoubtedly has been misused: "You [God] give [man] mastery over the works of your hands; you put all things under his feet." This verse should not be taken as license to exploit and harm the natural world. It may help to think of the way the term "master" has been used for Jesus. Jesus acknowledged to his disciples on the night before he died that he was indeed their master, but a master who set them an example by washing their feet (John 13). In other words, the master is not meant to exploit or harm, but to extend care. Human masters are often very different, but we have a model in Jesus our Master that is good to remember. How might we relate to the created world as that kind of loving, caring master?

One more comment about God and creation. To modern people the opposite of the created order is "nothing." But to the ancients the opposite of the created order was something much worse than "nothing." It was an active, malevolent force which we might describe as "chaos." When God created the world, God subdued this force of chaos and transformed what was uninhabitable to a livable habitat full of goodness. This is an important biblical concept about who God is and what God does.

Now let's turn to St. Francis of Assisi. He was a disciple of Jesus whose life is a wonderful example of joy; of humility; of compassion; of love for God, for the poor and the sick, and for all God's creatures.

Francis' father was a wealthy merchant in 12th century Italy. Until the age of 24 Francis enjoyed his privileged position. He was extravagant, well-dressed, fun-loving, and carefree. Then his heart was touched by the suffering of beggars and lepers and the suffering of Christ on the cross. Gradually Francis changed. He spent less time with his friends and more time tending lepers. He worked to rebuild a church that was in disrepair. Finally, he renounced wealth and possessions. He became a beggar and devoted himself to serving the poor and preaching the gospel. Men and women have been inspired by St. Francis and followed his example of humble service from his time

to ours. Only God can know how much good has been done over time for God's people and God's world because of this man.

St. Francis is well known for his special relationship with animals. He is reported to have preached to the birds, and so he is often depicted holding a bird. It is also reported that St. Francis wanted everyone who owned an ox or an ass to give them a good feed on Christmas Day out of reverence for the presence of an ox and an ass at the manger in which the infant Jesus slept. Because of his remarkable reverence for God's creatures, it is the custom in many churches to honor St. Francis by blessing animals on his feast day.

St. Francis' joy in God's creation is the part of his spirituality that is popularly emphasized. Equally important – perhaps more important – was St. Francis' spirituality of the cross. St. Francis meditated on the passion of Christ and had a deep perception of its importance. He believed that discipleship meant a willingness to suffer with and for Christ. Two years before his death St. Francis was at Mount La Verna. He had a vision of an angel and an understanding that he was to be transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified. St. Francis received the stigmata – the marks of the Lord's wounds – in his hands and feet and side. In his last years St. Francis suffered from blindness and disease, yet never lost his joy.

This is one of the mysteries of Christian discipleship, that just as Christ crucified and Christ resurrected are both true and real, in our lives both suffering and joy exist together. What St. Francis knew and what countless other deeply spiritual people know is that resurrection ultimately triumphs over death and joy over suffering. What St. Francis knew and what countless other deeply spiritual people know is that while we are among our suffering brothers and sisters, we may find joy in helping to relieve their suffering, by sharing the many blessings God has given us.

St. Francis believed that the Christian life was to be a life of prayer. After we receive Communion, in honor of St. Francis, we will pray the famous prayer attributed to him, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace." May we follow St. Francis' example and love God, love God's people, love God's creation and creatures, and bring peace to our world. In Jesus' name. Amen.