

Prophet & Saint Clare of Assisi

Gospel of Luke 12:32-40

August 12, 2007: Pentecost XI

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'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Gospel of Luke 12:32-40, NRSV

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Yesterday was the day in our Church Year on which we celebrate the life and ministry of the amazing St. Clare of Assisi. She was, in my opinion, and in many opinions, among the great women prophets of our Christian tradition. As the abbess of a visionary community of Sisters in the 13th century, at San Damiano Assisi, Italy, she gives us a stellar paradigm for who and what *we* are and who and what *we* hope to be, here in our own Christian community nearly 700 years hence and half way around the world. And so because of the confluence of Clare's Feast Day, today's Gospel from Luke, and our concentration this month on those who have been called by God to call others to God, St. Clare is this week's prophet of note.

The prophet Clare saw the call of Jesus Christ in a radically new and different way. As a result, she presented the clarity and the creativity and the courage to become the first women in the history of the Christian Church to accomplish Papal approval for her particular Rule of Life, that is the way of living that she wrote for her community of Sisters at the Monastery at San Damiano in Assisi, Italy in the first half of the thirteenth century.

Clare was a woman of great spiritual vision who made a unique and creative contribution to the religious life of the church. **Her innovation was her Rule that was based on the love of poverty.** Like peace and justice are our hallmark commitments to Christ's call in this world, poverty, that is,

a life without material attachment or dependence, was at the center of Clare's most heartfelt commitment in her time and place.

Now, we do not have the time to debate the theology of poverty here, but let us say that Clare saw poverty as the way of creation. Not as an affliction to be overcome, but as a freedom to be embraced. This is not the poverty with which we in this time and place are familiar. This is a voluntary poverty. This is not the sort of poverty that results from powerlessness, from being denied the basic necessities of life, or the fundamental right of self-determination. This is not the sort of poverty that enslaves much of our twenty first century world. This is rather the sort of poverty that governs creation, where there is no concept of private property, no idea of job or financial security, where every day is a blessing from God who has promised to provide for God's creation. This **voluntary, creational** poverty is the sort of poverty that grounded Clare's revolutionary Rule.

Ironically, Clare was born into a noble, wealthy family in Assisi in 1193. She met St. Francis at age 18 after she had already earned a local reputation for her own special spiritual gifts. Francis had heard about Clare's "holiness" – or so the official articles of Clare's Canonization read. And so although Clare is often called the first Franciscan woman, her holiness, her spiritual reputation preceded Francis' influence, and in fact it was the very thing that drew *him to her*, and not the other way around, as many of the legends suggest. So from the very beginning Clare was much more than a mere follower of Francis. She possessed a special and unique spiritual vision of her own, even before she met her mentor, who oddly enough, even though he had heard of her holiness, apparently went to *preach to* her rather than to hear what enlightenment she might have to offer him.

Not long after their first meeting, Clare experienced a religious conversion, she sold off her inheritance and gave it to the poor, she cut her hair, and joined Francis and his movement of itinerant religious vagabonds. Now, in order to understand how very radical this move was, we need to appreciate how women fit into the religious movements of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Clare did not join an acceptable association. She did not enter an established monastery or a recognized community, which was the way of religious women of that day. Francis and his friends had no status as they worked out their new ideas for living into the call and gospel of Jesus Christ. And so Clare joined a group that was decidedly at odds with her own thirteenth-century life and status. Clare was swimming against the status quo from the very beginning.

Francis welcomed Clare into his movement. He and Clare sought a radical new path. They refused to call anything their own. And it was the Gospel, not the Church, that provided the justification

for the radically different “form of life” that governed both Francis and Clare. In addition to their full commitment to a life of Gospel poverty, Francis and Clare comprised a movement, at least for a moment, that included members of both genders. This was also a first. This was a partnership between Brothers and Sisters in a time and place where men and women would not normally convene on spiritual or intellectual matters. Such a mixed gendered movement was a blatant break with the tenor of the time, and the tradition of the Church.

Nonetheless, Pope Innocent III sanctioned what has been called by scholars, “the Franciscan experiment” this mixed gendered movement, and he allowed it to continue. But it was not unconditional. The price for such a life was “fidelity” to the Church and “obedience to the hierarchy.” These obligations, however, were apparently acceptable to Francis and they would have a familiar ring over the next forty years of Clare’s own struggle with the papacy concerning her right to live a life of Gospel poverty; a life in direct opposition to the standards and norms of both the historical time and the tradition of the Church. We are of course talking here about the Roman Catholic Church, but these are our traditional roots, as the branch called the Anglican tradition did not emerge from the Roman Catholic trunk until the 16th century. So although Clare was Catholic, we Anglican Episcopalians were too at that time.....

Anyway, the acceptance of Clare’s Rule by the Pope elevated her vision from a personal privilege to a sanctioned right. On the 9th of August 1253 Pope Innocent IV made a visit to Clare’s deathbed. As time was of the essence, the Pope did not even wait for the customary official preparation of the manuscript. Rather, he wrote in his own hand on Clare’s own copy of her Rule of Life: “This is to be approved as it is.” Clare’s *Rule* was confirmed by the Church just two days before her death.

Clare’s Rule for her community was noteworthy on two accounts. First, her community had one distinguishing characteristic: it was founded on a vow of poverty - not obedience, or chastity, or charity - although each of them was a required vow. But the primary commitment was to a life of corporate as well as individual poverty, and this was the fundamental distinction between the monastery of St. Clare and all the other monasteries that preceded it. And let me say that Clare’s commitment to poverty was a highly outrageous proposition given her social location. In thirteenth-century Assisi, it was radical for women to be self-supporting, an assault on the feudal structure of the time.

Second, women had no political rights in the thirteenth century. And Clare’s community Rule was not only self-governing, but it had no hierarchy. And this was an equally devastatingly bold divergence from the norm. Clare’s insistence on community Rule without the structure of hierarchy was, like her insistence on poverty, completely at odds with the social standards of her

day. And so, Clare created a radical new orientation and concept for community: self-supporting and self-governing. And she did it in the 13th century and with the Pope's full and unequivocal endorsement.

As I said, I think that Clare is an outstanding model for our own calling here at St. John's. For Clare of Assisi was not only a visionary, not only the maker of a whole new kind of community, not only a woman of deep spirit and commitment to the way of Christ, a woman who insisted on practicing what she preached, living what she believed she was called to do, not only a radical renovator of social norms....but she accomplished all of this, she revised the priorities of her community, she rewrote the rules of her life, she recast the role of women in both the ecclesiastical world and society at large without ever breaking completely away from the rigid, seemingly immovable, apparently intractable structure of the church. Clare accomplished her radical mission without leaving the church...the strict, sexist, hierarchical structure of the Church.

When I hear about the turmoil and the tribulation that we are experiencing on the Anglican Communion today, I often think about Clare. When people ask me how, with my own radicalish theology and sense of the Gospel, how I can, why I want to be, a priest, an agent of the church – this institution with such seemingly unyielding patriarchy, and such fervently uncompromising insistence on doctrines that seems unjust and even unchristian in our world today, I often think of Clare.

And I wonder how we, as a community of peace making, justice loving, creative creatures of God's love can live into this powerful legacy? In what ways can our community and our individual lives reflect the prophetic path of St. Clare, who spent her life living into what she believed to be the way of Jesus Christ? How can we hear the calling of this prophet and, rise to our own prophetic selves. How can we discern our deepest commitment to Christ? And how can we respond by calling others with the courage that comes from that commitment?

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Clare's prophetic treasure was living a life of complete Gospel poverty. The question is: where is each of our prophetic treasure?

Amen.