

October 5, 2008
St. Francis Day
Gospel Mt 21:33-46
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This morning I am going to attempt to blend together portions of a Presbyterian day of observance, a Roman Catholic saint from the 13th century, Anglicanism in South Africa, a treasured story from the Middle East that has been passed on for two thousand years and a current ritual practiced in this country once a year. There is no cookbook for this recipe, but I am hopeful that our hunger for the Gospel will justify the creation of this auditory stew.

In 1936, the Presbyterian Church designated this first Sunday in October as World Communion Sunday. It was designed to be an ecumenical day to hold up the unity of the church and our common hope for peace in the world. In addition, the first celebrations of this event were really designed to raise money for missionaries and evangelism.

Since its inception, the Western Church believed that we had the truth and the rest of the world needed it – so evangelism became the most important global task of the church. But this has changed and here's why. Today, for the first time since Christianity began, there are now more Christians in Asia, Latin America and Africa than there are in Europe and North America. We are now the minority. The Christian Church is growing around the globe and the rest of the world needs the American Church less and less for evangelism every passing year. They are doing a fine job on their own. Yet our thinking still sees the American church at the center of the world. Likewise, most Americans see this country as the center of the universe. We need to change this attitude.

While I was in South Africa this summer, I spent a good deal of time unpacking my adolescent dreams of being a missionary priest in Africa. You see, I had been influenced by the Roman Catholic Church of my upbringing to become an ordained person spreading the Gospel in far away lands. In wrestling with this idealistic notion, I had many opportunities to speak with Anglican priests and seminarians about this issue. Interestingly, the 10 white, English speaking clergy and laypeople that I discussed this with all supported the idea of having more western, white, English speaking missionaries to come live and work in South Africa and they encouraged me to do so. On the flip side, the 21 Black Anglican clergy and seminarians said the opposite. The matter-of-fact response I received was, "If you want to be here and learn from us that is all well and good, but we don't need you or any other white foreigners taking charge, telling us what to do or how to do church." We Africans are quite capable of spreading the Gospel and building up the kingdom of God.

One of the students said it very succinctly for me. He suggested that if I really wanted to be helpful to the people in Africa that I should stay in the United States as I engaged in ordained ministry. His rationale was simple: I live in the most powerful country in the world which consumes more than its fair share of the world's resources. Our lifestyles, attitudes and national policies greatly impact the rest of the world – mostly in a negative

way. He suggested that I work to help change people's self-centeredness, consumption habits and attitudes and help Americans understand that they are part of the world community and that their actions greatly impact their brothers and sisters around the world. In giving me this mission he said I would help to transform the world – one person at a time.

As some of you know, I was part of a Roman Catholic religious order for a few years right after college. This group, the Franciscans, was founded by Francis of Assisi and our Church recognizes October 4th as the day of his death. Many people know about Francis and his love of nature, creation and especially animals. It is common for us to practice a yearly ritual of blessing animals in honor of St. Francis on the Sunday closest to his observed feast. And yes, we are going to do this today, so hopefully you will all bring your beloved pets to receive this blessing.

But Francis did more than just identify with the goodness of animals and nature. He believed fervently in evangelism – spreading the Good News of the Gospel to the whole world. He wanted everyone to live in the peace, joy and bounty of God's love.

But he didn't start out with this attitude. As a young adult Francis used his family's wealth to party and outfit himself with armor and the weapons of war to serve as a knight in the petty fiefdom battles of his day. On one such military excursion, he fell ill and had an encounter with God. He left the campaign and went back to his family home. Through prayer, discussions and much searching he experienced a conversion and in a public meeting with his family and the bishop, Francis renounced his inheritance and gave all of his possessions, including the clothes he was wearing back to his father. He went off naked and assumed the clothing of a beggar.

Francis threw off his self-centeredness and started seeing the entire natural world around him as a blessing from God. He began singing songs in praise of God's goodness as he realized his inter-connectedness with everything and everyone in God's creation. He began referring to every aspect of God's creation as brother or sister. Francis lived the rest of his life with this changed attitude. He understood that his behavior impacted nature, animals and people so he set out to live in harmony with every created thing on the planet. Francis went out to be in communion or right relationship with God and the world.

In our Gospel reading this morning we heard about the parable of the wicked tenants. We typically hear this story to mean: The landowner is God. God sends messengers to people (in particular, to Israel). The people reject the messengers and kill the son who is sent. Consequently, God will do as the landowner did by rejecting Israel and choosing another people.

But how well does the parable really fit that interpretation? The setting of the parable is the estate of a very wealthy landowner. The landowner does not live on the land, and doesn't do the work of planting and harvesting. Those who do that hard work are hired

laborers and sharecroppers, who have to turn over most of what they grow to the landowner so they are barely able to squeak out a subsistence living.

This absentee landlord does not send messengers out of any great love for the people or the land, but rather to get the goods that sustain his life of ease in another country. How familiar is this story of a foreign power coming into a country and establishing a factory, mine or farm and then exploiting the land, people and resources for their own gain?

The Black Africans I met this summer have a good grasp on this situation. I was staying in the mid-size colonial community of Grahamstown. Now this city is located in a basin with large hills all around. The remains of the English fort and its canons overlook the city. The Apartheid government had separated the races by moving all of the Black people outside of the city into “townships” while the white folks lived in the city. It’s hard not to notice this segregation today because all you have to do is look up at the hills and see the poor housing that is occupied by the Black community. I also find it ironic that these indigenous people live on the high ground near the overlooking watchtower of the abandoned fort.

The white English settlers came into Grahamstown in 1820 and conquered the land from the native population. This disparity of land distribution continues today. I met three white ranchers at the Anglican Cathedral where I was serving as deacon. We talked about their businesses and how much negativity and ill will they had to endure from the local Black folks – some of whom were employed by these ranches. These three men described their hard work and how they had to protect their investments especially from Blacks who were frequently accused of stealing the rancher’s livestock. In addition, none of these white businessmen knew any Black people who owned land or farms.

What would happen if instead of seeing God in our parable today as the landowner, we looked at the tenants and hired hands as being God? Would God, could God be acting to overthrow the unjust landowner and return the land to a more equitable distribution with the local people?

Jesus said in this reading, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce fruits for the kingdom. Could it be that Jesus is saying that the power, control and riches will be taken away from those who have it now and given back to those who are without?”

Or maybe, those who currently enjoy the fruits of the land are being called to share the bounty with people who are lacking. Maybe the intention of this parable is to help us see the injustices in the world in a new way so that we might knock down our watchtowers and fences that keep us separated from the rest of humanity.

It is important to remember that we do not do God's work alone. When we work for justice and peace we join hands with millions of others from around the world, and most importantly, we join the work that God is also engaged in. Our hope springs from the

truth that God is not idle in the face of world problems. Rather, God is still the Prime Mover, the Righteous One, and the God who has the whole world in divine hands.

In the footsteps of World Communion Day and the feast of St. Francis, I believe that we are all called to be in communion with the entire created world in order to do acts both great and small to welcome God's presence into our midst.

I would like to issue a challenge for all of us today. As we receive communion, I would ask all of us to be in prayer for one specific concern we have for the world. Let us pray fervently for those who are suffering and crushed by exploitation. Let us also pray for God's guidance about something we each can do individually. When we leave here and return to our homes, let us educate ourselves about the concern that we have identified. Let us become conversant in this one thing. Let it become a passion for us so that we may join in with God's work in the world right from our own homes and in the communities we live in.

May we also live into the prayer that is attributed to St. Francis, so that we may be in communion – in right relationship with our neighbors far and wide.

Please join me in saying this prayer. It is found on page 833 in the Book of Common Prayer.

AMEN.