

St Francis Day 2020 – last sermon at Grace

Usually on a Covid-tide Sunday morning it is just our human companions that we miss here at Grace. Today, the Feast of St Francis, we also miss the barking, meowing, grunting, hissing and general beautiful chaos that our animal companions bring with them. So blessings to all your animal companions at home! May the spirit of St Francis who included all the most overlooked parts of God's creation within the circle of his love surround them and all of us today!

Today's readings capture perfectly the two sides of St Francis's character – the gentle saint who finds refreshment and rest in God's beautiful creation, and the fierce saint who embraced the leper and became one with the poor. On this, my last sermon in this beautiful, complicated city named for St Francis, I want to entrust both parts of his calling to you.

Let's begin with the gentle invitation of the gospel, for all who are weary to come to Jesus and find rest. Anyone out there not feeling weary just now? Weary with anxiety over COVID. Weary with outrage over endemic racism. Weary watching politics based on lies and personal attacks. The weight of our shared weariness added to the personal burdens each of us is carrying threatens to crush the joy and hope from our spirits. We are weary right now.

We are weary, and the gentle, compelling voice of Jesus calls us to rest. This is the first part of Christ's calling that I entrust to you as I leave. Love yourself as Jesus loves you. Value yourself as God values you – your infinite worth lying in who you are not in what you do. Find in Jesus your resting place, the space where you can give up adulting for a while and know yourself held in an embrace of love that enfolds the whole world. Give yourself a break, people! Don't try and be everything to everyone – [don't try and make everyone happy – you are not pizza] embrace your finitude, your limitedness, and let God be God.

Do what St Francis did. Strip off the expectations of others that stop you being yourself. Walk away from a life where worth depends on defeating or diminishing others – wash that nasty presidential debate from your mind. Find delight in the companionship of all God's creation – the fierce and wild wolves and rushing waters, the quiet and whimsical songbirds and soft pets. And the human parts too. St Francis didn't only commune with animals, he also companioned human beings – us who are fierce, wild, whimsical, soft creatures, who too often forget our animal, bodily needs.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

And yet, and also - from Jeremiah: “He judged the cause of the poor and needy; *then* it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord.” Rest is not the whole story, delight in creation is not the whole story. The gentle “Disney princess” St Francis communing with the twittering birds is not the whole story of the man we celebrate today.

St Francis was very aware of those in his own day whose burdens were heavier than his own, those who were not able to find the rest they were promised. St Francis reminds us that, as well as receiving God's solace and rest, we are also called to give it to others. Like the saint we are called to be as Christ to our world. We are to give rest to those our world has excessively wearied. To those of us who bear the burdens of our history, of colonialism, of slavery, of racism and sexism. We must help all people to be un-burdened, to find rest for their souls.

This is the second part of God's calling that I entrust to you. To be the ones who offer the possibility of rest and respite to others, who know God through knowing, and embracing, the cause of the poor and the needy.

To be perfectly honest, it has been a hard four years to share this country with you. The 2016 election happened just weeks after I was appointed, so all my time here has been during the term of an intemperate, dishonest, bullying leader who abuses women and mocks those with disabilities. Who has presided over a time in politics that has seen women's rights and gay and trans rights attacked, immigrant children caged, and white supremacy move toward the mainstream. I pray that Donald and Melania make a full recovery from COVID 19. I also pray for a change of heart so all leaders in this country heed God's words: "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice;"

And woe to us when we do the same! We may not be called to embrace poverty as Francis did, but we are unequivocally, inescapably and repeatedly called to embrace the poor. And poor here has a wide meaning, as wide as the ways our world oppresses those without power. The poor are obviously those who are unhoused here on our streets, as well as those families whose ability to pay for both rent and food is fragile. But they are also those robbed of their birthright to be seen and treated as full human beings, equal to any and every other person – that includes black, indigenous and people of colour. That includes LGBTQ people. That includes women.

May America, and all the world, understand what true religion is, what true Christianity is. Not to wave a Bible or try to control people's sexual behaviour. Not to denounce those who understand God differently. Not to uphold family values and yearn for a return to the 1950s. But this, this – to judge the cause of the poor and the needy. Then it will be well. Then we will truly know God. This is what it means to be church. This is what it means to be Grace Cathedral – to know God through knowing the oppressed. To love God through loving the oppressed. To reimagine church, and to tell the Christian story, so that all may receive God's loving gift of rest.

I am so thankful to you all for welcoming me among you four years ago. For sharing this beautiful, complicated city of St Francis with me. May you all know yourselves beloved of God, worthy of rest, and held close in the loving arms of the divine. May you all know yourselves called to bring God's justice to bear in this city, this nation and beyond. And also know that, wherever I am, Grace Cathedral will be held here, deep in my heart.