

July 28, 2013

"Continue to live your lives in him [that is in Christ Jesus],
rooted and built up in him and established in the faith,
just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

I find the readings appointed for this morning's worship to be full of unexpected and puzzling surprises. Who would expect God to work through a whore? ... Don't we expect to find Godly works among the "better" people of our community?

Well sometimes we do find Godly works in the "nicer" circles of society, but not always. Especially not, if we fall for the temptation of equating "nicer" with "wealthier."

Jesus good friends Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus, were wealthy enough to have that jar of costly nard in the house, a whole pound of the stuff, worth a year's wages for a working man as John's Gospel relates the story. Jesus stayed at their house often when he was in the area.

But Jesus also spent a great deal of his time and ate many meals among the poor and the outcasts. As we read the Gospels, we see those were the ones, the poor and the outcasts, who received his message of Good News most readily. Remember, it was the rich young man who was invited to sell all he had and join Jesus' disciples, but he declined. He went away sad. There are Godly folks at every level of society, and there are also some pretty un-Godly folks at every level as well.

So today we learn that God told Hosea to marry a whore. Then we get details of God's warning message to Israel through the names God gives Hosea for the children he has with Gomer. This is a surprising reminder for us that God can and does work in all sorts of circumstances, and through all sorts and conditions of human kind.

Then we move on to the Psalm, where we read that God has withdrawn his fury, turned from his wrathful indignation, and restored the good fortune of Jacob. "Jacob" is another name for Israel.

Which is it God? Lo-ruhamah, God "will no longer have pity on the house of Israel?" Or, "You have restored the good fortune of Jacob?" It makes me puzzled.

And then there is the reading from the Gospel, Luke's version of Jesus teaching us how to pray. It seems familiar, doesn't it? But it is not quite the same as the prayer we all know. The prayer we say in worship is mostly based on Matthew's version of Jesus' teaching, and Matthew recalls the words just a little differently.

Luke's telling is not identical, but that troublesome business of forgiving others is still in there. We are taught to ask God to forgive us our sins. That is comforting. But Luke, just like Matthew, tells us Jesus did not stop there. He went on "for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."

Oh!?? Do we? Everyone? Even that so-and-so who did you-know-what to me? I am supposed to forgive HIM?!!

Yes! I am supposed to forgive him. Or her. But there are some things that are very hard to forgive. I cannot do it. Not on my own, anyway. I just do not want to let it go. So this is yet another puzzle. What am I to do?

The Letter to the Colossians begins to offer us an answer to my struggles - "Continue to live your lives in him [that is in Christ Jesus], rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

The letter goes on to warn about several sorts of traps that we should be on guard against, traps based on human tradition, on un-Godly spirits, not according to Christ; and traps relating to food and drink, to observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths; and traps involving self-abasement, worshiping angels, or dwelling on visions.

The letter has much good advice for us, but just like that forgiveness business, I cannot manage to follow that advice by myself for more than a little while. Then I remember Jesus' closing promise from the Gospel message, truly a message of Good News [that is what "Gospel" means, "Good News"].

Our heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! With the Holy Spirit's help I can deal with these puzzles. What I need to do is pray for discernment, pray for God's guidance in coping with the puzzles, the challenges that face me today.

I have been speaking mostly about myself so far, my own puzzlement and struggles, but I am pretty sure I am not alone. I strongly suspect that each one of us here this morning has puzzles and struggles to deal with, challenges that may seem overwhelming at times, perhaps appearing to be impossible to overcome. So this journey to Jesus' promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit is for all of us. It is Good News for all of us. We all need discernment.

It is also Good News for St. Francis Church. This parish is facing its own very significant struggles and puzzles right now and badly needs to discern God's plans for the future.

Let me tell you about just one puzzling struggle - the parish's finances. In human terms, St. Francis Church is in deep financial trouble. As I read the financial reports I have been shown, the money will run out in less than two years. Then you will have to close the doors. But that is in human terms.

God has not abandoned St. Francis Church, and God does not want St. Francis to close. It will take prayer and discernment and faithful Godly action to solve this challenge. Let me tell you about how God has lead Sue and me to begin.

A couple of months ago we met with those of the vestry who showed up for a meeting and laid out the problem. The money will run out. I told them I can see only three possible paths into the future: (1) close the doors; (2) increase income; (3) decrease expenses. I do not believe God wants the doors closed, so I think the answer is a combination of #2 and #3, increased income and decreased expenses.

So, St. Francis Church - that is you and me, folks - needs to pray for Holy Spirit discernment about how to accomplish God's will in this. On the income side Sue and I discerned God's call to challenge the vestry to examine their own giving as leaders of the parish. This morning I am laying down the same challenge to the whole church.

The Biblical standard of giving is the tithe, that is 10%. How does your financial support of God's work at St. Francis measure up to the standard? Go home and do the math. You did not make pledges last year, so just compare your usual Sunday offering to your annual income.

Next, if you are not at the tithe, take a step toward it. If you are at 5%, for the rest of this year try to make 6%. If you are at 1%, try for 1½%. If you find you are only at 1/4%, try to get up to 1/3% or ½% or whatever you can do. God knows your struggles and your finances. Almost no one is ever able to jump all the way to 10% in the first year. It took Sue and me several years of small steps to get there. The important thing is to pray for discernment and to begin the journey.

In order to help St. Francis increase its income, Sue and I have given the vestry a pledge, the only pledge you have this year. We pledged to give our tithe and offerings for the rest of this year to St. Francis Church in the amount of \$5,000. We cannot solve the problem on our own, but we are willing to help.

God is leading me in another area also, praying for healing. Healing prayer has become a significant aspect of ministry for me over the years. Perhaps I'll tell you about it in future sermons. At any rate, when you called me as your interim pastor, healing prayer is part of the package.

When Sue served you here a few years back, St. Francis had a long standing practice of offering anointing and prayers for healing at 6:30 on Wednesday evening. Beginning on the first Wednesday of next month, I shall resume that practice.

In addition, as some may have noticed, we will anoint and lay on hands for healing as we distribute communion whenever we know of a need or request. So do not be shy about asking for prayer, for yourself or for someone you care about. Praying for healing will be one more way for us at St. Francis to cooperate with God to make grace and blessing available in Youngsville.

Now to decreasing expenses. I do not know the answer to that one, but God does. I am laying down another challenge this morning. I ask that every member, everyone who worships at St. Francis, commit to praying daily for discernment of

God's plan for this parish. Please take out your Prayer Books and turn to the prayer "For the Parish" at the bottom of page 817. Please use this prayer at home at least once a day from now until Labor Day. We will see where we are then. ...

Let us pray.

Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.