

“Though I am bold enough in Christ  
to command you to do your duty,  
yet I would rather appeal to you  
on the basis of love ...  
in order that your good deed might be voluntary  
and not something forced.”

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I have both *Good News* and *Bad News* for you  
this morning!

The bad news is that there are changes  
coming to St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church.

The good news is that there are changes  
coming to St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church.

But first, lets take a look at some bad news  
from today's *Gospel* reading. Jesus says that we  
cannot be his disciples. At least some of us,  
perhaps many of us, cannot be his disciples. Who  
cannot be Jesus' my disciple?

- “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple.”
- “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own wife and children . . . he cannot be my disciple.”
- “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own brothers and sisters . . . he cannot be my disciple.”
- “If anyone comes to me and does not bear his own cross and come after me . . . he cannot be my disciple.”
- “If anyone comes to me and does not renounce all that he has . . . he cannot be my disciple.”

“. . . Cannot Be My Disciple.” Scary words! If I have decided to follow Jesus, these words are very scary. I try to bear my cross, but I cannot do like Francis and walk naked into the forest. I have had my differences with my brother and sister, my parents, my children, and even my wife once in a while. But I certainly do not hate them. I do want to be Jesus' disciple. And I truly hope you do as well.

What are we to make of this scary passage? Let me read you a passage from Sarah Dylan Breuer, a commentator I sometimes find helpful:

The invitation in this Sunday's Gospel is to end old patterns of relationship, thereby becoming free to enter into new patterns of relationship. There's no way of forcing that on someone else, though – and to those who don't choose to follow Jesus, as their sister or brother, spouse, parent, or son or daughter did, would experience their abandonment as an act of hate. On the other hand, family members who joined the Jesus movement would find themselves part of a much larger family of sisters and brothers committed to care for one another. Choosing to follow Jesus can involve stark and difficult choices, and [as] with any set of choices that could change the world, following Jesus presents others with choices they may not find welcome.

Dylan said that very well, I think. Jesus calls us to allow God to change us in ways that others may find not to their liking. Nevertheless, we are to make those changes. We are to commit ourselves first to God's call, not parents, or brothers, or sisters, or children, or even our

spouses. We are to commit to following God's call, even at the cost of our life, let alone our material possessions.

Does God really expect such a radical change of us? Yes! God explained it to Jeremiah using the example of the potter and the clay. God is the potter, and we are the clay. At any time God can rework the clay into whatever sort of vessel God wants. And we are to submit and accept the changes God calls for in our lives, even over the objections of our families, ... even at the cost of our possessions, even at the cost of our lives.

Jeremiah goes on to tell us that God may decide to tear down a nation, or a kingdom, [or, I would suggest, anything else, even a church]. But if that kingdom, or that nation or that church, or whatever, turns from its evil and its error and its failings, God says, "I will change my mind about the disaster I intended to bring on it." God will turn bad news into good news.

Why did I suggest God's words through Jeremiah might even be for a church? Because

they seem to be speaking St. Francis Church. I began by saying that changes are coming to St. Francis. Not that I am forcing change on you, oh no. You the congregation are changing. You are shrinking. Look around the room. Bishop Sean thought St Francis was averaging about 40 people on a Sunday, but since Sue and I have been here it has rarely been even 20.

People are leaving St. Francis, and more have told me they are considering leaving. [Most of] the children and youth and young families are going where there are activities for them with others their own age.

Why are we shrinking? I will probably never know all the reasons, but one thing I am hearing over and over in various ways from various people is complaints about other St. Francis people. Fault finding is overtaking neighbor love. And that does not attract new people to join our congregation, it only glorifies the enemy we usually name as Satan. He loves anything that takes our focus away from God.

So where does all this leave us? Through Jeremiah God says that if we change our ways, God will change his mind about the bleak future in front of us.

I am calling St. Francis Church to change, "end old patterns of relationship, thereby becoming free to enter into new patterns of relationship." I am calling St. Francis Church to put aside fault finding and put aside seeking our own way, turning instead to God, relying on God, and seeking to become God's church. So far I have begun this effort in four ways:

- Praying by singing the "Prayer of St. Francis" together every week, which will transform us into channels of God's peace and love when we pray and sing earnestly.
- Calling the parish to pray daily the prayer "For the Parish" from page 817 of the BCP, which will transform the parish in ways none of us can imagine today, if we pray earnestly and faithfully.
- Restoring the custom of weekly services of prayer for healing through which God has

already been touching lives and bringing healing and peace to the participants. I invite you to come and see and participate and lend your prayer support next Wednesday and the Wednesdays following.

- Teaching tithing as God's standard for giving for God's work in this world, or working toward tithing through proportional [or percentage based] giving, which will transform our hearts. Jesus spoke the simple truth when he told us, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." I know this is so from my own life experience.

I will talk more about tithing in weeks to come, but understand this much today - we are not called to tithe to pay the church's bills, although that is a concern here at St. Francis. We are called to tithe for a much more important reason - our spiritual life and spiritual growth. Though the medium is financial, tithing is a profoundly spiritual practice.

There are changes coming. We seem to be transforming into a congregation mostly of

grandparents. The Good News is that God has not abandoned St. Francis Church. Now it is for us to pray for the parish, to discern where and how God wants to use us grandparents to build up God's kingdom, and to grow in our own spiritual lives enough to allow God to change us and use us. Even in ways that were not our own idea. Even alongside someone whom we were ready to complain about yesterday.

Last night Tim Dyer quoted from Steven Covey's book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. This passage is written about a husband wondering how to love his wife when he does not feel love for her. I want to quote it here as advice for loving neighbors, especially fellow church members, when we do not feel love for them at the moment. The man asked Covey:

"What do you suggest?"

"Love her," he replied.

"I told you, the feeling just isn't there anymore."

"Love her," Steven replied again.

"You don't understand. The feeling of love just isn't there."

"Then love her. If the feeling isn't there, that's a good reason to love her."

The man looked at him and said, "But how do you love when you don't love?"

Steven said, "My friend, love is a verb. Love-the feeling-is a fruit of love, the verb. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?"

I could try to stand here and tell you you must do as I say. However I do not believe that would work very well, only drive more people away. Therefore I merely urge you to sing and pray and be healed and grow toward the tithe. I merely urge you to love one another. With St. Paul, I too say, "Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love ... in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced."

Amen.