

September 27, 2009

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper B

Mark 9:38-50

The Blessing of the Animals

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd John Herring (preacher)

Saint Francis is one of the most "popular" of all the saints. He can be seen in gardens around the world. He is enshrined on bird baths and bird feeders. The prayer that we associate with him, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace," is one of the most popular prayers circulated. He is the patron saint of animal lovers, peace-makers, and ecologists. He is associated with important works of mercy to the poor and marginalized. Yet, one of the more interesting elements of the story of St. Francis, is the rejection of the system of anxiety he made when he accepted the invitation of Christ.

St. Francis was the son of a wealthy, influential man. One day, in the church of San Damiano, he seemed to hear Christ saying to him, "Francis, repair my falling house." He took the words literally, and sold a bale of silk from his father's warehouse to pay for repairs to the church of San Damiano. His father was outraged, and there was a public confrontation at which his father disinherited and disowned him, and he in turn renounced his father's wealth--one account says that he not only handed his father his purse, but also took off his expensive clothes, laid them at his father's feet, and walked away naked. He declared himself "wedded to Lady Poverty", renounced all material possessions, and devoted himself to serving the poor.

I am a parent. Part of my parental responsibility is to provide them with a stable and loving life at home, to try to give my children every opportunity for success that I can, to protect them, to give them a fighting chance in our world. I am a parent, that's what I do. Therefore, when I hear the story of St. Francis, with the filters I possess, that of a parent, I have an awful lot of sympathy for the father. Who would want this life for his or her child? One does not have to be a parent to have this sentiment. Who would want this for a friend, a sibling, any loved one?

There is a woman who involved in youth ministry. She is a committed Christian and raised her son as such. One day she received a call from her son, who was in college at this time. He decided to leave his studies to join a group of Americans going to Iraq to be with Iraqi civilians during the US bombing and subsequent occupation. This group hoped that their presence might protect the lives of civilians and bring awareness to their suffering. Naturally, the mother was upset. She told her son that he made a commitment to his education and this was no time to get involved in radical politics. His response was, "But mom, this is not politics. This is following Jesus. We are going as a Christian group. Didn't you and the church always teach me that Jesus was always befriending the weak and suffering?" She had no answer for that. When the mother was asked later about

her son's response she said, "I know he is right. But, if I knew he was going to do something like this, I would have taken him out of the Church and raised him as a Chippendale dancer."

We have our own ideas, our own rationales, our own systems in place about how to live life, how to get ahead in life, even how to honor God with our lives, and we have a hard time accepting when others come along, who hear God's call in a radically different manner. In fact, other ideas, or simply the other, make us anxious, because our way of life feeds into the stream of anxiety. This way of anxiety affect us all.

We try to Control, forcing a belief system on other (you are in or out); we insist on results in a measurable way, usually wealth; we demand conformity, expecting others to tow the line, to quietly get along; are these all products of an anxiety driven society, fruits of this anxiety system. So, it is no surprise that St. Francis' father and the mother of that college student reacted the way they did. We are all part of that system. We all feed it and feed from it. Bit by bit, this anxiety steals a little of our soul and it often gets worse as we get older. We get a little more attached to it.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus say that God's ways have been hidden from the wise and given to the babes, not necessarily babies, but the unwise, the unlearned, those who do not dominate the system, the anxiety driven, society pleasing system. Jesus then makes it clear. His way is easy, gentle. There is no burden. Rather, we are given an invitation to get out of the anxiety driven system, the yoke that is upon us right now, so we can try to make things right, step by step, bit by bit. Jesus is not standing over us as taskmaster, when we get things wrong. In Christ, we are given the opportunity to experience a system based on love.

The ministry of presence, the building of relationships, the freedom for creativity, the giving of compassion all, the freedom to live a life of integrity, to live a life open to the Holy Spirit, all flow from this system. That is the invitation we have from Jesus. Accepting that invitation is what allowed St. Francis to tap into that system of love, to bring compassion and blessings to countless many, to put God at the center of life. It is why St. Francis looked at creation in an entirely new way, even the animals. St. Francis was not superhuman, was not perfect, did not always have happy times and lived in hardship. But, he found joy, peace of mind, lived with integrity and loved abundantly. Who wouldn't want that for his or her child, for a loved one?

We are going to bless the animals today, as a way of honoring the love St. Francis had for all of creation. But, we are also going to bring communion to you. I hope we will all take time to reflect on that twist. Christ is coming to you. The invitation to remove the yoke is coming to you. The real opportunity to live humbly and free is here. I hope we all can summon the courage to leave behind

what we know, to lay down our anxieties and accept the invitation of love in abundance.