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St. Luke's Episcopal Church ~ Anchorage, Kentucky
19th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21) September 24 & 25, 2016
Luke 16: 19-31

Last night we held the annual blessing of the animals' service on the Lyman House lawn, in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day is October 4th. St. Francis, born in the year 1181 or 1182, is best known as the patron saint of animals. I'm quite certain many of you have seen statues of St. Francis in various settings, and his statues almost always have a bird upon his shoulder, and often other animals seated at his feet.

Indeed, St. Francis was a lover of animals and nature, and this love was rooted in his love and devotion to God the creator, but more importantly – St. Francis was a lover of souls. There is so much more about St. Francis that I would like to share with you today. He was born into a well to do family, as his father was Assisian cloth merchant, and his mother was from a noble family of Provence.

In his younger years, it was said that no one loved pleasure more than Francis; he had a ready wit and delighted in wearing fine clothes exuding a showy display. He was handsome, chivalrous, and courteous, and had become the prime favorite among the young nobles of Assisi. Yet, even during this time, something resonated within Francis, as he showed an instinctive sympathy with the poor. And although he spent money lavishly, the money seemed to flow into channels that reached the poor and destitute.

When Francis was about twenty years old, he went out to fight the Perugians, in one of the frequent trivial skirmishes between rivaling cities, which was common during that time. The Assisians were defeated and Francis, among others, had been taken prisoner and held captive for

more than a year in Perugia. During his time in captivity Francis became ill with fever, and it was on this occasion that Francis experienced a spiritual awakening of sorts. He found his thoughts turning toward things of eternity, and he began to realize the emptiness of the life that he had been leading. This would prove to be only the beginning of the events what would change his life forever.

When Francis was released, and his health returned, he continued to fight battles, and his eagerness for a successful military career had been rekindled. As a result of his victorious battles he was selected to be Knighted, by a Count of the Neapolitan states. It was documented that the evening before the Knighting ceremony, Francis had a dream of being in an enormous Hall hung with armor all marked with the Cross, and he heard a voice that said “These are for you and your soldiers.” Francis subsequently became ill again, preventing him from attending the Knighting ceremony, which would change the course of his life forever.

His demeanor indicated that his heart had been changed and he no longer yearned for a life of high esteem. He longed for a life in Christ, and instead of seeking success in fighting battles, he found himself seeking prayer and solitude. This would be the beginning of a new life for Francis, and he proclaimed the following “I am about to take a wife of surpassing fairness” and this wife would come to be ‘Lady Poverty.’ Though never Knighted St. Francis would go on to be canonized by Pope Gregory the IX (ninth) in the year 1228.

Talk about transformation and sacrifice. How does one wrap their mind around giving up all creature comforts and possessions to live a life of hardship and deficiency, a life of poverty? It seems counterintuitive, does it not? How does one learn to be content with this way of life? I suppose it all boils down to one’s definition of contentment. What does it mean to be content?

How do you find contentment? Where do you, where do I find contentment, which is really synonymous with peace?

One could contrast the wealthy man in fine purple linen who feasted sumptuously every day with that life of St. Francis. The wealthy man it seemed was content with his comfortable circumstances, all of his needs were met and to a great degree. In contrast Francis ultimately found that only a life of poverty would bring him a true contentment, and this contentment could only be achieved by rendering his life to serve others. Can contentment be achieved by the accumulation wealth? Perhaps, however, I suppose that would depend on the value that is placed upon the wealth, or the manner in which wealth is defined. Taking into account today's standards - wealth could be construed as success, or at least our individual definition of success.

The great Greek philosopher Socrates once said "He who is not content with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have." Francis traded his fine clothing for clothing worn by peasants, and in doing this he found contentment. In his letter to the people of Philippi and in the acknowledgment of their gift, the Apostle Paul writes for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13). So what is this secret of learning to be content in all circumstances that Paul alludes to? This like so many other nuances in scripture can take a lifetime, if at all, for us to discover.

Is it wealth? Is it success? Is it love or peace? What is it for you, or I ask myself, what is it for me? Only we are able to discern the answer to this thought provoking question? One could

sum it up, quite simply actually, to the teaching of Jesus, as recorded in the gospel of Matthew and Luke “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21, Luke 12:34 NRSV). Where is your treasure? For where your treasure is where you/we will find true contentment.

Now St. Francis of Assisi is an extreme example of giving up all to heed the call of God. God above all knows of our needs, and I don’t believe that he is calling all of us to strip ourselves of all of our earthly belongings, but I do believe that He is calling us to walk with closer with Him, and when we choose this path, it often requires sacrifice and redefining who we are as followers of Christ Jesus.

When we here of poverty, we naturally think of people who are hungry, homeless, and in great need, and this is indeed true. However, there is also the poverty of being unloved or uncared for and this in the words of Mother Teresa is perhaps “the greatest poverty.” St. Francis embraced this as he embraced lepers and others who were marginalized by society of the day. Yes, he left behind a lavish lifestyle and clothed himself with utter humility, and as he made his journey he connected not only with the poor but also with people of affluence, who were living in poverty of another degree. There was a deficiency and emptiness in their lives that could only be filled with the love of Christ.

It all comes down to the heart of Jesus’ teaching, which we here over and over again in the gospel. Jesus calls us to reach out to the poor – yet this also means the poor in Spirit, the widow and the orphan – and this also means reaching out to the lonely and marginalized. For when we do this we embrace what it is to live in Christ, As Paul illustrates in his letter to Timothy “There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing in

to the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.” “Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” St. Francis exemplified this fight of faith that Paul alludes to.

Last month I met a fascinating woman who is living the good fight of faith – a modern-day St. Francis of sorts. (The story of Peg).

Fight the good fight of faith..... Amen.