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Our Savior Lutheran Church
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Pentecost 18

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I have to say that this was a difficult week for sermon writing.

It was a difficult week because of the presidential debate, and then most recently the news about the President and his wife contracting the coronavirus.

But it was difficult predominantly because of the debate.

For please understand that I try to be objective.

Please understand that I try to be stay out of the fray that is politics.

Please understand that I try to listen, and I try to be an informed voter. I try to understand both sides.

I really do.

And so, I never like preaching politics from the pulpit.

I will preach justice, I will preach grace, I will preach the goodness and mercy of God, and all of these things touch upon politics, but I don't like preaching overtly about politics, because it doesn't allow for a conversation.

I will talk politics with people on the side, but from the pulpit I have a tough time, because preaching is so one-sided, right?

It is just me preaching with no opportunity for some back and forth.

So, I struggled this week in my sermon prep with the idea of even mentioning the debate today.

I could just let it go altogether, but the debate was so much in our face this week, that I thought, "Am I doing a disservice by not mentioning it?"

If I just preached the gospel not even mentioning the debate there would appear to be a great disconnect.

I could just explain Jesus' parable in the gospel.

I could just talk about this story that Jesus shared 2000 years ago, talking about the landowner, and the vineyard, and so on.

But that would not be faithful to what we are experiencing as a nation, right now?

At the same time, I was thinking during my sermon prep that many people are probably sick to death of listening about politics.

And the last thing they want to hear is more about the presidential debate.

Many of you may have come to church so that you don't have to hear about either Trump or Biden.

So this was my struggle this week.

Do I talk about the debate, or do I talk about something else?

And then I realized that today is October 4th.

Today is the day that the church remembers St. Francis of Assisi.

And so, I thought that maybe in light of all the mudslinging and animosity to which we have been continually exposed to in this election cycle...

Maybe instead of the political rhetoric that has poisoned our spirits day-in and day-out these many weeks.

Maybe what we all need to hear is some words about the life and the witness of a man who was a true inspiration.

Maybe remembering St. Francis could be uplifting for us.

Maybe remembering St. Francis could stir up in us a sense of peace and compassion.

Maybe remembering St. Francis could remind us that we should rise above our human differences and rise above our difference of opinion, so as to serve the greater good.

So this is what I want to do with today's sermon.

I want to share with you the life and ministry of St. Francis.

St. Francis who we may remember loved animals.

St. Francis who was known to actually preach to the animals.

St. Francis who if we didn't know was responsible for our beloved manger scenes at Christmas time.

Yes, those scenes depicting Mary and Joseph, and baby Jesus, with animals all around...

Those scenes we see during the holidays in town squares, and in front of churches...

Those scenes of small figurines that we display in our homes...

This was conceived by St. Francis.

But he was more than animals and manger scenes.

PAUSE

Now Francis was born around 1182 in the town of Assisi in modern-day Italy.

He was born into a merchant family, which means his father's business required Francis' father to travel quite a bit, especially to France.

And indeed, it is because of his father's admiration of the French, that Francis was called Francesco (meaning "French").

Francis had actually been baptized with the name Giovanni (meaning "John"). But he came to be called Francesco.

Francesco, or "Frank," as we have the name in our culture today, was actually an ethnic name, much in the way we might say a person of Jewish descent is a Jew.

And interestingly enough, the name "Francesco," or "Francis" or "Frank" was almost unknown as a common name, until Francis.

Indeed, it was St. Francis who popularized the name.

And so, if we know anyone with the name "Frank" you can tell them that their name comes from St. Francis.

My father-in-law, when meeting someone says, "Hi, my name is Frank, and so you know I will be open, honest, and upfront with you."

"I will be frank with you," he likes to say.

That aside, as a youth, Francis worked in his father's business and he enjoyed the pleasures of life. He enjoyed a comfortable living.

And Francis' early ambition was not to become a great Christian.

His early ambition was not become some saint.

No, he wanted to become a knight and he longed for the adventurous life of chivalry.

And in fact, he took part in a conflict between his hometown of Assisi and the neighboring town of Perugia, during which he was captured and imprisoned.

And during his imprisonment, he became seriously ill with a fever, and had to return home.

When he had recovered, he prepared to go off to war again, this time against Apulia.

But before he did so, he had vision in a dream.

He saw a hall in which hung suits of armor, and a voice asked him, "Francis, who is it better to serve, the Master or the Servant?" Francis answered, "The master."

Francis underwent a complete change of heart from that moment.

He renounced his former comfortable life. He exchanged his clothes for rags. And, he made a religious pilgrimage to Rome.

He began putting his energy in of all things, rebuilding churches.

And then, on February 24, 1209, after morning worship, he was leaving the chapel in Portiuncula near Assisi.

And so moved by the words of the gospel for that day, which was Jesus' words to his disciples in Matthew 10:7-13, which reads in part, "As you go, proclaim the good news. The kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without

payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff..."

As St. Francis left the church, after hearing this gospel lesson...

As he was leaving the church, he took off his shoes, and removed outer cloak, and replaced his belt with a piece of rope, tying it around his long brown peasant's smock, and began his mission.

Ten years later this garb was the uniform of five thousand men.

And today, we still see devotees of the Franciscan Order wearing this uniform. To be sure, every once in a while, I will see a Franciscan monk coming or going at the hospital, as they make their rounds to patients.

So St. Francis started an order, a community within the Catholic faith, which sanctioned by Pope Innocent III in 1210.

That order stresses a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, a far cry from what our world seeks.

In his later years, St. Francis eventually relinquished the leadership of the order and withdrew more and more to be by himself.

And it is said that during this time, on September 14, the day in which the church observes Holy Cross Day, while St. Francis was praying, he experienced the marks of stigmata, which means he received the wounds of Christ on his own body, in his hands and side.

There seems to be little debate about the truthfulness of this story, whatever psychological or supernatural origin of the marks.

Indeed, St. Francis in his life desired more than anything to find perfect joy through experiencing the sufferings of our Lord.

St. Francis died on October 4, 1226 at the age of 44.

Two years later, he was canonized as a saint.

And, his example lives on as the current pope, formerly Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, decided to take the name Pope Francis because of St. Francis of Assisi.

It is tradition that when an individual is elected Pope they adopt another name.

It is not unlike becoming a parent and receiving the name “Mom” and “Dad.”

It is not unlike graduating from medical school and receiving the name “doctor.”

It is not unlike being ordained and receiving the name “pastor.”

When a significant event in a person’s life happens we receive a new name.

Only the Pope chooses his name and in this case, Cardinal Bergoglio chose Francis.

One report explaining the pope’s decision for this name said, “Cardinal Bergoglio has a special place in his heart and his ministry for the poor, the disenfranchised, for those living on the fringes and facing injustice.”

PAUSE

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, I lift up today the life and witness of St. Francis of Assisi.

For there is much we can take from his example as we ponder the future leadership of our country.

When I ponder our ecosystem, I think about Francis’ care for the animals, especially when we hear in the news the collapse of biodiversity, that is the continued loss of numerous animal species.

Yes, when I ponder the animal kingdom, I think about Francis’ care for the animals, especially when I also read that 500,000 sharks may need to be killed to create a vaccine, because there is something in sharks that is used to manufacture vaccines.

When I ponder the state of unemployment in our country, and poverty in our world, I think about Francis’ care for the poor, and I think about his words, “For it is in giving that we receive.”

When I ponder the arrogance of the talking heads on television, I think about Francis’ vow of poverty and his humility and specifically his words, “Holy humility confounds pride and confounds all the men of this world and all things that are in the world.”

When I ponder the greed of individuals, I think of Francis taking off his shoes and giving up his cloak, and I think about his words, “Men lose all material things, they leave behind them in this world, but they carry with them the reward of their

charity and the alms they give. For these, they will receive from the Lord the reward and recompense they deserve.”

And when I ponder the hatred between parties and between people, I think of Francis who said, “No one is to be called enemy, all are your benefactors, and no one does you harm. You have no enemy except yourselves.”

And when I think about all the unrest in our society, and in our world, I think about Francis’ prayer...

Lord, make us an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred, let us sow peace...

Where there is injury, pardon...

Where there is doubt, faith...

Where there is despair, hope...

Where there is darkness, light...

Where there is sadness, joy...

O Divine Master, grant that we may

Not so much seek to be consoled as to console

To be understood, as to understand

To be loved, as to love

For it is in giving that we receive.

And it is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Amen.

PAUSE

Friends, we give thanks for St. Francis of Assisi today, and we pray that his example may touch many and may have a profound impact in our world today.

We need more like Francis.

We need more who devote their lives to the Lord and walk in his ways.

Thanks be to God. Amen.