

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi – October 4, 2017

(Readings: Early Rule of Francis of Assisi (ER XXII); James 1: 16-21; Matthew 10:7-14)

Happy Feast Day!

Francis of Assisi never fails to challenge, inspire, and delight me.

Let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us ... in every place, at every hour ... continually ... truly and humbly ... hold in our heart, love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless ...

Francis' experience of God is so fully integrated in his body, mind, heart and soul that he is simply not able to use one phrase or one adjective, to describe the fullness of his heart, or the depth of his relationship with the incarnate God.

Today's readings have me asking myself ... **“what is in your heart?”**

The early biographers tell us that when Francis heard the passage from the gospel of Matthew that we listened to today, he received it as “instructions for his new form of life.” Francis desired to “proclaim the good news” and encourage reconciliation. Francis sought to live the simple lifestyle taught by Jesus. To do so, Francis knew that it was critical to MODEL to everyone this deep desire. To live authentically and with integrity, he knew it was essential to “practice what is preached,” or, if you will, to “walk the talk.”

Francis understood intrinsically that words alone do not mean anything. In his time Francis saw corruption and violence practiced while words of reconciliation were preached. Strikingly similar to our world today.

Francis instructed his followers saying, “While you are proclaiming peace with your lips, be careful to have it even more fully in your heart.” He cautioned them saying, “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.” Francis taught his followers to be cheerful despite adversity, and to bless and to be kind to those who treated them with contempt. He urged his followers to remain full of hope and joy and give thanks to the most “High and Supreme Eternal God.”

Author Gillian Ahlgren, in her book *The Tenderness of God: Reclaiming Our Humanity*, speculates that “[Francis] was interested in establishing a home for God in the human community. He wanted everyone to pursue a shared commitment to find Christ incarnate in our midst, without walls and without exclusion...he was interested in being ... an enlightened witness, someone who through kindness, tenderness, and focused, intense love, can return people back to themselves.”¹

“What is in our hearts?”

Our second reading from James also reminds us that every “good action and every perfect gift is from God.” James also provides instruction on how to live the life that God desires for each of us.

¹ Ahlgren, Gillian T; *The Tenderness of God: Reclaiming Our Humanity*, p. 58

“Always be willing to listen and slow to speak

Do not become angry easily. Anger will not help you live the good life that God wants [for you].

Put out of your life evil and every kind of wrong

Don't be proud

*Accept God's teaching **that is already in your hearts.**”*

A week and a half ago, I was facilitating a retreat of Sisters and Associates. The theme was, being open to God's action, and planting seeds for the future. Let's just say that of the 150 plus people, not *everyone* appreciated the message. A few were not welcoming, and a few chose not to listen. As I left that weekend I was physically exhausted, although humorously awestruck by God's mysterious ways. Because of the timing, I was also reflecting on today's readings. This line from Matthew's gospel rolled around in my mind.

“Whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter, greet it with peace.” If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.”

It also brought to mind a funny line that says, “Just love everyone, I'll sort them out later,” signed God.

Whew, I am grateful it is not my responsibility to determine worthiness ... but it is my responsibility to choose what is in my heart. I could choose to have peace in my heart or I could choose to carry frustration, anger, or blame. As difficult as it truly is, we DO have a choice of what is in our hearts.

Francis didn't make the decision to follow in the footsteps of Jesus just once ... he made that choice with every step, every decision, every word, and every action.

Gillian Ahlgren writes, ... *“choice becomes a deliberate, intentional, and life-giving decision to be faithful to the process of collaborating with the unfolding mystery of God in our lives.”*²

What is in our hearts becomes the source of our actions and behaviors, even if our words say something different. Francis lived a life of authenticity because God was so fully integrated into his very being. Transformation happens through our lived experience of God in our midst.

The legacy of Francis invites us into this same authentic, scripture-centered way of life. A way of living that is so filled with a personal experience of God's abundant love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness that our hearts ... and our words ... and our actions are authentically integrated. It is this way of living that has the “capacity to put people in touch with the power of the Gospel.”³

“What is in our hearts?”

² Ibid (p.65)

³ Merkle, Judith; *Beyond Our Lights and Shadows: Charism and Institution in the Church.*