

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, October 4, 2020, Daniel Garner Tate
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Psalm 19, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

Let the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and redeemer.

Today, October 4, is the day we celebrate the life of St Francis of Assisi. This is the day we would usually bless the animals, both here in the church and at the Foster City Dog Park after the service. Sadly, we don't get to do formal blessings, because of the pandemic. Let us hope that by next year at this time we can resume this tradition and safely gather.

St. Francis reminds me of the importance of stewardship and service. We celebrate his life because he loved animals, but also because he cared for creation. In 1979, Pope John Paul II paid tribute to Francis' love for animals and creation by declaring him the patron saint of ecologists.¹ When we look to the life of St Francis, we are reminded that if we don't take care of creation, our environment, then we are not being good stewards. Nature when healthy, is a healer, and animals can be healers. This is especially true during this time when many of us are socially isolated, and with fires going, the air polluted, we see how finely balanced the natural world is.

Francis was also a man of service. He was born into wealth, was a wild wasteful young man, but he eventually became so moved by the plight of the poor around him, especially those diseased with leprosy, that he gave up his wealth, and chose to spend all his time, instead of making money continuing the legacy of his father, to serve the poor.

These themes of stewardship and service also come through in our scriptures today. Our Old Testament reading is from Exodus and it outlines the ten commandments. On the surface it's straightforward. Do these things, don't do these other things. But there is within them, encouragement to stewardship and service.

When we remember the sabbath day and keep it holy, after having worked for six days, we honor God, but we also honor our bodies, by taking care of ourselves with rest and reflection. If we don't rest, we get unbalanced. We get sick, we get grumpy, we make mistakes. We can forget God, the one who created us.

When we honor our fathers and our mothers, no matter the mistakes they may or may not have made when raising us, we preserve their memory, we preserve our memory of them, we return the gift of life they gave us with gratitude, we are the stewards of what they built, and what they built in us. We build on the life that they have given us.

When it comes to serving, most importantly, we are to serve God, and God only. No idol worship, no other Gods. "I am the LORD your God...you shall have no other gods before me."

The reading from Philippians continues on these themes of stewardship and service. Paul in his work with the Philippians continued the process of preserving and building up the Christian community, the church that was started by the disciples and the others who came before him.

Paul in his letter, speaks about his past, his beginnings, what his priorities were, how he came from privilege, doing everything right according to how he was raised. He was a

¹ <https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/st-francis-assisi>, accessed 10/3/2020
"St. Francis of Assisi: A profile of the patron saint of animals and ecology."

Pharisee, he was respected, he was a Roman. Yet, after his conversion, he gave up his privilege, his status, to be an apostle, a witness for Jesus. He found that by giving it all up, he was gaining everything, including eternal life, by following Jesus, by answering God's call, by sharing the gift he had been given. Before he was transformed, he says he has "every reason to be confident in the flesh," to live with the idea that the material world, power, the political world were the most important things. He learned that instead, building the church, building community, being of service, humbling himself, were more important than elevating himself.

A few weeks ago, we had the parable of the generous vineyard owner who hired workers to harvest grapes. He hired them in the morning, afternoon, and evening and then paid them all the same at the end of the day. The ones who worked all day complained that it wasn't fair for them to have worked all day and have gotten the same pay as those who only worked from the beginning of the day. But that's not the point. The generous landlord is being generous to all no matter when they come. The landlord is being a good steward of what God has given. He is sharing his wealth. The harvest is a success, all the workers get paid a generous sum no matter when they arrive.

Jesus says that the first will be last and the last will be first. It's not so much that the first and the last will be swapping places, it has to do with equality. We all end up in the same place.

This week Jesus tells us another vineyard story. In this case the owner is not present, but has tenants running the property. When the time comes, the owner sends servants to collect the harvests, but the tenants beat, stone, and kill them. The owner sends more servants, and the tenants do the same thing again. Finally, the owner sends his son to collect the harvest and the tenants kill the son thinking that they can get away with it. In the end of the story the owner gets rid of the tenant.

It's here in this parable where the themes of stewardship and service become very clear for me. For example: We live in the United States. It is made up of land and resources, and most importantly, people. It is a vineyard. We who live here are the owners of it, temporarily, because ultimately, God owns it. We the living, are the current temporary owners.

We have leaders, locally and in distant places, who we have elected to make decisions on our behalf for the maintenance and the betterment, the growth of our country. We pay them and we pay taxes to make these things happen: To protect us from enemies, from disease, to sustain and preserve the environment, resources, to sustain and preserve the infrastructure, for our generation and the generations that will follow us, and to care for those who are in need. These leaders are our tenants. We've hired them. Do more people have shelter, health, health care, work, than four years ago? Has the environment been improved? The time is coming when we will soon vote, to decide as landlords if our tenants are doing the job, or if they need to be cast out. We decide if they've been good stewards or not. We elevate our leaders, but at the same time, they are our servants, they work for us.

The wonderful thing about scripture is that it can be applied to the time we live in. Jesus told the story in his time and it meant a certain thing to the people hearing it then, but it can have multiple meanings, both then and now. It can be applied to our present circumstances.

God help us to be good stewards, to be mindful of the need to be of service and help

our leaders to be the same. Let us follow the examples that St Francis, Paul and Jesus provide for us.