

GOLDEN JUBILEE OF PROFESSION FOR FRIAR PETER CHEPAITIS
St Mark's Lutheran Church, July 20, 2018

First Reading: Ezekiel 36:24-28

I will draw you from the nations, gather you from exile and bring you home.
I will wash you in fresh water, rid you from the filth of idols and make you clean again. I will make you a new heart, breathe new spirit into you.
I will remove your heart of stone, give you back a heart of flesh.
I will give you my own spirit to lead you in my ways, faithful to what I command.
Then you will live in the land, the land I gave your ancestors.
You will be my people and I will be your God.

Second Reading: II Corinthians 8, 7, 9, 13-15

Brothers and sisters:

just as you are rich in every respect, in faith and discourse, in knowledge, in total concern and in our love for you, may you also abound in your work of charity.

You are well acquainted with the favor shown you by our Lord Jesus Christ: how for your sake he made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty. The relief of others ought not to impoverish you; there should be a certain equality. Your plenty at the present time should supply their need so that their surplus may in turn one day supply your need, with equality as the result.

As it is written, "The one who gathered much had no excess
and the one who gathered little had no lack."

Gospel: Luke 4:16-22

Jesus came to Nazareth where he had been reared, and entering the synagogue on the Sabbath as he was in the habit of doing, he stood up to do the reading. When the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed him, he unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me;
Therefore the Most High has anointed me:
Sending me to bring good news to the poor,
To proclaim freedom to those in prison,
And recovery of sight to the blind
To let the oppressed go free,
And to announce a year of favor from the Lord."*

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.
The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them,
"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

As I look out at your faces, I can see the prophesy at the end of this Gospel passage fulfilled: *"Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."* I have seen you bringing good news to the poor by your compassion, I have collaborated with you to bless the imprisoned with freedom, I have witnessed your work to bring a year of favor to this community.

That Gospel passage sums up how Jesus preached, both with his words & his life.

Fifty years ago, on July 15, 1968, I professed vows of poverty, chastity & obedience and became part of the family of the Order of Friars Minor of Holy Name Province. I renewed those vows on June 21, 2018, at St. Francis Church in Mid-town Manhattan. You can see the letters OFM after my name on the program - that's what they stand for. A translation for those who don't know Latin or the life of Francis of Assisi could be *"family of lesser brothers."*

Today, we who are Friars, always challenge each other to "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words."



Peter & his classmates renew their vows in NYC on June 21

Since then, I have been inspired and challenged by the example of St. Francis. His song has been a theme that I have heard & attempted to live up to on every step of my journey. Sometimes, by the grace of God, I have succeeded, but even my failures have been part of my growth into being a "lesser brother." This is the song I still passionately desire to sing with my life:

♪ Sacred the land, sacred the water, sacred the sky holy and true.

Sacred all life, sacred each other, all reflect God who is good.

All praise be yours through Brother Sun, bearing a likeness to you most High One.

Sister Earth, our Mother who nurtures, feeding, yielding flower & herb. ♪

We sang a version of that song at the beginning of this Eucharist, "All Creatures of Our God and King," another translation of the great canticle of creatures composed by St. Francis. This canticle has been and continues to be the deepest source of my spirituality and a roadmap for my ministry.

After studying theology in DC, I spend 6 years teaching High School. During that time, I was ordained a deacon (like Gary) & a year later, a presbyter (like Fr. Matt). My ministry became very active - I taught French & music appreciation to HS seminarians in Callicoon, NY

[if you have never heard of that village, you can google it].

After being ordained a priest, I taught French & religion at Timon High School in Buffalo. But I also directed musicals, formed a student music ministry & led a charismatic prayer group. I was giving talks on prayer all over the Diocese of Buffalo, but I was not really spending enough time in prayer myself.

The tension between ministry & prayer was not balanced, the violin string of my life was out of tune, so, in 1977, I asked to go to my community's House of Prayer in Callicoon, the place where I had taught HS seminarians. It was there that I experienced the grace of the 1st reading - from the prophet Ezekiel, "*I will make you a new heart, breathe new spirit into you.*" During those years, along with the canticle Francis composed, I began to sing another song with my life; one that is reflected by the writings of St. Clare of Assisi.

♪ GAZE UPON THE LORD; GAZE UPON HIS FACE. GAZE UPON THE ONE WHO HOLDS YOU IN HIS EMBRACE. GAZE UPON HIS LIFE; GAZE UPON HIS LOVE; GAZE UPON HIS COMING POOR FROM HEAV'N ABOVE. ♪

After the House of Prayer closed in 1987, I served at St. Bonaventure University as part of the campus ministry team for 5 yrs, & then moved to NJ as a full time preacher of Parish Missions and retreats with other friars - as part of the Franciscan Ministry of the Word of Holy Name Province - until 1995. It was back to the active side of my spiritual journey, but still with a deep hunger to gaze upon the Lord in prayer.

During that part of my journey, I also became active in giving Marriage Encounters with an interfaith team as well as serving in regional and national leadership with Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim couples.

Preaching the Good News as Jesus did in the Gospel passage we heard became the primary focus of my life and ministry. The verse before the Gospel reflected the call Jesus heard, and which his Spirit called me to follow:

♪ *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me/who has sent me to bring good news/
To the poor, the oppressed and rejected.* ♪

In 1995, after a wonderful sabbatical when I spent time in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Taizé and Assisi, I was called to Middleburgh. One of the voices of the Spirit that called me here came through Kim & Reggie Harris, whom I met while at SBU, and who would sometimes preach with me when I was doing Parish Missions.

Another voice was my own mother's, who lived in Hudson where I grew up. Middleburgh was much closer to her home than any place I had been stationed before. I wanted to be closer to her as she came closer to meeting God face to face. I moved to Middleburgh to begin Bethany Ministries along with Sr. Anna, who, independently of me, had the same vision.

We wanted to preach the Gospel more collaboratively & out of a more contemplative base. We found that our partnership in ministry preached even more effectively than our words.



Anna & Peter as Francis and Clare

During the past 23 years, we have experienced the presence of God in both death & life many times. Anna's mother died in 2000, and we walked some of the last steps of her journey with her before we celebrated her life & grieved her passing in NJ.

My own mother died in 2009, & my 3 sisters, along with Anna were at her bedside as she breathed out on earth & breathed in for the first time in God's house. At her funeral we sang the psalm we sang today, a song of hope which we sang at Anna's golden jubilee in 2012 and at my celebration in NYC with the Friars this past June:

♪ God has done great things for us, filled us with laughter and music. ♪

In 2011, I thought I was being called to close the 3rd ministry in my 50 years as a Friar. I had been part of the last faculty of the HS Seminary in 1972, & the last days of the House of Prayer in Warwick, NY in 1987. Hurricane Irene came to this valley and I lost everything in the house I was renting next to the Schoharie Creek except the books & art that was above the 5 ½ feet of mud & water that came through. But through so many of you, and through the support of my Friar community, I heard another song, reflected in the words of the 2nd reading,

♪ O poverty, source of riches, Jesus, grant to us one heart with the lowly. ♪

As we witnessed the birth of Our Lady of the Valley Café - the group that is preparing a meal for us after this liturgy - & as we experienced a deep communion with all who had suffered from the flood, Bethany Ministries was reborn, as was the community where we had lived for 16 years. Together we experienced the truth of the words of the 2nd reading:

"For your sake Christ made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty."

The Body of Christ in Middleburgh experienced the poverty of loss together, let go denominational divisions & came together to serve the whole community.

Today, in 2018, I have another chance to live and grow into the words of St. Francis at the end of his life: *"I have done what is mine to do, may Christ teach you what is yours."*

I rejoice in the blessings of the past 50 years, and I am grateful for the lessons I have learned from the dark times, but most of all I remember these words of my hero and example,
St. Francis:

"Let us begin again, for up to now we have done little or nothing."

I invite you to sing with Sr. Anna and I the song I began with, and to live the words we sing:

♪ Sacred the land, sacred the water, sacred the sky holy and true.
Sacred all life, sacred each other, all reflect God who is good.

**All praise be yours through those who forgive enduring in peace in You they shall live
Sister Death whom none can outrun embracing, rebirthing all who choose love. ♪**



Peter at St. Mark's Lutheran Church



Peter & Guests at Jubilee in NYC