

27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A CYCLE, OCTOBER 8, 2017

First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7 (The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel)

Responsorial Psalm 80 *"The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel."*

Second Reading: Philippians 4:6-9 (The peace that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts & minds)

Alleluia Verse: *"I have chosen you from the world, says the Lord, to go and bear fruit that will last."*

Gospel: Matthew 21:33-43 (The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.)

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

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

Last Wednesday, October 4th, was the feast of St. Francis - and that was a musical setting of his greatest prayer, the Canticle of Brother Sun, which he prayed on the night before he died. You are probably more familiar with another setting, All Creatures of our God and King. We believe that this refrain is very appropriate to our own day.

A week ago we were shocked by the killing of so many in Las Vegas. There is a wonderful story about St. Francis that applies directly to dealing with the violence we hear about almost every day in our country and in our world. It is the story of how Francis met and tamed the wolf of Gubbio.

[Go to the end of this file to read a version of the story of how St. Francis tamed a wolf that was terrorizing the village of Gubbio]



This familiar story is not just about Francis and animals, it is a parable of relationship, of dialogue, of diplomacy & of non-violence. What the shootings in Las Vegas, the attack in Nashville, the demonstrations in Charlottesville and many other outbreaks of lethal violence have in common is the illusion that violence is the answer, the remedy for a personal, societal or national problem.

It's deeply imbedded in American culture. We see it in many cartoons, TV crime dramas, movies & video games. Walter Wink, a Biblical scholar & theologian who died in 2012, calls it *The myth of redemptive violence*.

The story of Francis and the wolf goes directly against that illusion. So does the Gospel. But it is an illusion that has existed since the beginning. Cain thought he could fix his resentment by killing his brother. There are many stories in the Old Testament where God is praised for wiping out the enemies of the Israelites. Jesus even refers to this pattern in his sermon on the mount. But he rejects it in his teaching when he says, "You have heard it said *"love your friends, but hate your enemies; but I say to you love your enemies, pray for your persecutors."* His attitude is even clearer when we reflect on his choice to resist evil without violence by accepting suffering & death - and transforming it by rising above it.

In the Gospel today, he tells a story of violence. The tenants considered the first two groups of servants as threats. They represent the prophets that God sent to Israel. Then they treated the son as a source of income. The absurdity of expecting to get his inheritance by killing him seems obvious, it is meant to shock us as it would have shocked the ones he was speaking to. Even the reaction of the chief priests & elders is violent. The story is a mirror to look into and examine our lives. How do we treat each other? How do we treat the land, the water, the air, all life?

In the first reading we hear what God is looking for. In the original Hebrew, there is a play on words. The words for judgment and bloodshed sound the same. It's something like "God says, I looked for judgment, a *willing* response to my love but I got bloodshed, a *willful* rejection of my prophets

God is still looking for justice and peace from those who claim to be believers. God is still looking for peace and justice from you and me. We are challenged, as individuals, families, a parish community to treat each other as sacred. How can we respond?

St. Francis can give us a direction, but each of us will have to listen to the Spirit to hear what God wants from us. Francis said, at the end of his life, I have done what is mine to do, may Christ teach you what is yours. I am not called to be Francis of Assisi, or Mother Theresa, or Pope Francis or Malala Yousafzai, or Bono.

I am called to be myself, Peter, to be the person God is still forming. Each of us is called in our own peculiar way to treat others & ourselves as sacred. And to live in the spirit of St. Francis & our native brothers & sisters by treating creation itself as sacred.

Francis exposed the illusion of violence, control and possession. He considered everything as a gift. The tenants in the Gospel tried to steal the land from the owner, and ended up losing it because they tried to possess it rather than receiving it as a gift.

The Gospel truth is that when we do treat others as sacred - when we take even small steps to treat the land, the water, the air, all life as sacred we become a stone in the shoe of a culture that celebrates conspicuous consumption, that fights wars to maintain a profit margin, that is addicted to violence. When we really live the values of Jesus, we risk being rejected, as he was.

But we hear in the Gospel, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone - another play on words. This phrase, from Ps 118, verse 22, is quoted 5 times in the New Testament. It refers to Christ, of course. He is the Son who is killed, rejected, then is raised from the dead & becomes the cornerstone of the church we belong to now & of a spirituality that goes beyond the institution.

But I see that in my life over and over again - something that I avoid or reject becomes a way for God to get into my life. That was especially true when Hurricane Irene hit Mdbg. 6 years ago & I lost most of my possessions, yet found new energy & joy in my life & ministry.

If we can see that pattern in the life of Jesus, and recognize it in our own lives, perhaps we can take some steps to make it real in the church and the world.

We can begin to ask healing questions like: Why can't the conflicts in our personal lives & in the world be solved by non-violent means and lead to a new vision of the human family? Why can't we spend billions for peace while releasing the money spent for bombs & guns to repair our health care system and end hunger in the world? Why can't listening to the voices of women & the poor in the Church lead to changing the structures that lead to oppression and abuse?

Why can't we make laws to enact common sense gun control & spend more time & money on treating mental illness as steps to make violent outbreaks less common and less lethal?

The pattern expressed in the punch line of the gospel, *The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone*, is the heart of the Eucharistic prayer which is the central prayer of the Mass. In a few moments, we will recall how Christ was rejected, died and rose and became the center of what we do here every weekend.

One of the biographers of St Francis says that he did not so much say prayers, he became a prayer - he lived the way he prayed. That is our call as well, as expressed in another song:

*♪♪ Live like a prayer now, deep in your hearts. Live like a prayer now, 'cause we are all a part.
Live like a prayer now, if we want to survive. We are, we are all alive. ♪♪*



St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio

There was in Italy the town of Gubbio, a prosperous village that had a great problem. A wolf was attacking and eating the people and their livestock. Nothing the townspeople did protected them from the wolf. Never had they seen such a fierce predator. He killed and ate first a shepherd, then the shepherd's brother and father when they went out to deal with this menace. The next morning the town was abuzz with the story told by the shepherd's mother and sisters. The mayor of Gubbio announced that he would send three of his best guards to find and slay the wolf that very afternoon. At dusk the townspeople could hear shouts and clashing of metal from the woods. Then it was quiet. The guards had met the wolf. Late in the night the only survivor of the encounter struggled into the anxious town and collapsed. After he was revived, he told his tale of their fight with the fierce and powerful wolf. As the story rushed through town the wolf grew larger and more ferocious. Fear was in the eyes of everyone in Gubbio. Children were kept close by, weapons at the ready and the defenses of the town raised. The mayor consulted with his advisors and decided to see if Francis of Assisi could help them. They had heard that he could talk to animals and that God talked to him.

Several brave messengers were sent to find Francis and ask him for his help. They had the good fortune to find him in Assisi at the house of Bernardo Quintivalle, his first follower. They told him of the tragic attacks of the wolf and how the frightened people were almost in a state of siege. They begged the simple Holy man to help them. They said that they did not know what to do, that the wolf must be a punishment by God and they thought Francis was the only one who would be able to help them. They implored him to come with them right away. Gubbio was two days away and the town would be in the grip of the wolf for four days by their return. They feared for their families and friends. Francis was moved by their plight and wanted to do what he could. He said they could leave in the morning and they should eat and rest with his Brothers that night. They found room with Bernardo where Francis was living. He had a four story house with many rooms for his large family. After dinner they prayed with Francis for a solution and slept that night with hope in their hearts.

Dawn found them walking down the hill from Assisi on their way to Gubbio, the messengers taking longer strides than Francis to hurry back to they knew not what awaited. In time they arrived at the woods near the town, the messengers pointing to where the wolf had slain and eaten the two guards not far from the road. They stayed in a tighter group as they hurried the rest of the way, watching for the wolf. The gate to the town was opened as they arrived and was quickly closed behind them. Two days after the guards encountered the wolf, there was another attack on a shepherd's flock. The entire town followed Francis to the town square where Mayor Buitano eagerly met them. He and the mayor went into the town hall to eat and discuss what Francis would do with the wolf.

The mayor wondered what Francis could do with such a challenge. He wanted Francis to strike the wolf dead or send him to the town of Spoleto, their old enemy. Either one would satisfy a revenge and stop the attacks. At the least, could Francis just get him to kill only wild animals like other wolves. Oh, how he hated that wolf, if he were younger, he would have led the guards after the wolf. He knew the men who were killed and their families, one of the guards was a cousin to the mayor's wife. Francis listened as the mayor described what had happened to their peaceful town. He had much empathy for the families of the victims and wanted to meet the wolf and hear his story, too. Francis stated that the next morning he would go the woods where the guards had been killed to see if he could find the wolf. That night he prayed for the wisdom to find a solution that would benefit everyone.

Early the next morning, refreshed and confident that this would work out, Francis left the townspeople who accompanied him out of Gubbio. They wished him well and retreated to their homes, worried that Francis would share the fate of the shepherds and guards. He walked on to the woods, ready to engage the wolf. As he neared the first trees, the wolf appeared and began to stalk Francis. Seeing the wolf, Francis felt the wolf connecting with him. Francis walked toward him. He made the sign of the cross and called the wolf to meet him in peace under the grace of the Lord. The wolf stopped and watched as Francis came closer. "Come Brother Wolf, I will not hurt you. Let us talk in peace." The wolf, understanding that Francis meant him no harm, walked to him and lay down, ready to listen. Francis told the wolf that he had come from Gubbio and described what the townspeople were experiencing because of the wolf's actions. He described their pain and the resentment they held toward the wolf. "How did this come to happen?" Francis asked the wolf. "Why did you kill the livestock and people?" The wolf told Francis his story. He had been left behind by his pack because he was injured and couldn't keep up with them. He could only catch prey that didn't run fast, like sheep and goats. That first shepherd he killed was trying to protect his flock and the wolf had no choice but to fight back and kill him. He didn't even like the taste of the man, but since he was lying there dead, he might as well make a meal of it. That afternoon two more men came after him and instinct took over. He quickly killed them, but left their bodies where they fell. He had no hunger.

The next day the three guards came hunting him and he was only defending himself. He let the third man get away since he was no longer a threat. He really preferred to eat deer and rabbits, but that was out of the question with his injured leg. All he wanted was to eat when he was hungry. Francis could see that the wolf was only acting to fill his needs. He had made some unfortunate choices that affected people of whom he knew nothing. Through Francis he was able to feel the pain of the people in Gubbio, but he needed to eat. What could he do? He was a wolf and they eat meat, but he was sorry for the pain he had caused.

Francis had an answer to the dilemma that could meet the needs of both the town and the wolf. He proposed to the wolf that the townspeople could feed him and he would stop killing the people and their livestock. Brother Wolf thought this would work well for him, but won't the people still want to kill him? Francis understood the wolf's concern and assured him he would present the idea to the townspeople in such a way that he would be forgiven and welcomed into the town. He knew they could let go of their fear and hate if they saw the wolf accede to a peaceful relationship and ask for forgiveness. Francis extended his hand to the wolf and Brother Wolf placed his paw in the hand, signifying his agreement.

Francis and the wolf walked back toward the town. As they neared the gate, some people came out, not believing their eyes. The two of them continued to the town square, although the wolf had to keep his eyes on Francis to still his fear. The mayor and the entire town were waiting, watching the wolf with hate and fear. Francis called out to them "Come countrymen, the wolf will not hurt you. Let us talk in peace. I have spoken with the wolf and he apologizes for his actions and wants to make amends." Francis told them Brother Wolf's story. "He has the same needs as you and only wants to eat and not go hungry. Can the people of Gubbio feed him if he promises to never again take the lives of the people and their animals? This is your wolf, he can't be killed or passed off to Spoleto or Perugia. He will serve the town as a defender as long as he will live. Remember the words of Our Savior on the cross, *"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

The citizens of Gubbio talked with each other for hours to reach an agreement. The relatives of the dead were the hardest to convince. They had such a hard place in their hearts for the wolf. Finally, after many tears, they found compassion for Brother Wolf. The wife of the shepherd who was the first to fall to the wolf's hunger brought out some food to feed the wolf. She was crying in relief to have the burden of hate lifted from her spirit. More food was brought out and soon everyone was eating together. Francis asked Mayor Buitano and Brother Wolf to each take his hands and declare a pact that the people would be safe from the wolf and the wolf would be safe from them. Everyone was joyous that the shadow of fear had been lifted from their town.

The wolf was seen every day at one door or another receiving his food. Word spread to other towns and soon the people of Gubbio were proclaiming proudly that they had a special wolf, Brother Wolf. He lived another two years like that, cared for by the generous and forgiving town of Gubbio until he died.



This version written by
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