

18th Sunday of the Year –Cycle B – St. Mark’s Lutheran Church - August 2, 2015

1st Reading: Exodus 16:2-15 “I will rain down bread from heaven for you.”

Responsive Reading: Psalm 145:10-21

2nd Reading: Ephesians 4: 1-16 “Live a life worthy of your calling.”

Gospel: John 6:22-35 “I am the bread of life.”

*♪ We are called to act with justice, we are called to love tenderly,
We are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God. ♪*

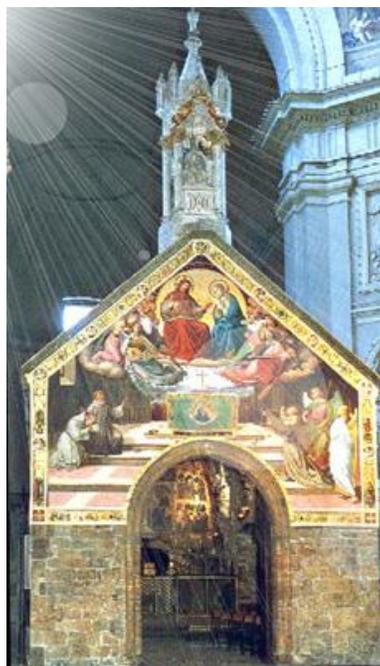
The words are from Micah, the prophet. We heard the same challenge in the Scripture from Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians today, “Live a life worthy of the calling you have received, with perfect *humility*, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another *lovingly*.”

We are called to live a life worthy of our calling as disciples of Christ.

Jesus quotes Moses in Matthew's Gospel and says, “*Not on bread alone do we live, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.*” Both Moses and Jesus feed us with more than bread, quail & fish. They feed us with the word of mercy, of forgiveness & reconciliation.

Today is a special feast for Franciscans - a feast which celebrates the *gift* of mercy.

We call it the feast of the Portiuncula - the word means “Little Portion.” , Today, it exists as a tiny little building within a huge basilica, sort of a church within a church.



In a way, this congregation is a church within a church, a part of the larger Body of Christ. Here in Middleburgh, the Reformed, Methodist, Lutheran & Catholic congregations are “little churches” within the Church of Jesus Christ.

Aug. 2 is the anniversary of the dedication of this little church & the basilica which was built around it. It is called the church of Our Lady of the Angels, so this day is also the feast day of the city of Los Angeles. [The original title of that city was: “The Town of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels.”]

The Portiuncula is the place the first friars came to live, it was the place where Francis received Clare into religious life, & it was the place where he died and entered into the fullness of communion with his beloved.

This feast had its origin in a dream that Francis had. He was praying in this church when he saw a bright light. Jesus and Mary & singing angels appeared. They invited Francis to ask for whatever he thought best for the salvation of human beings. So, in 1216, Francis asked the Pope to decree that everyone who came to the Portiuncula and repented of their sins would receive full pardon, the forgiveness of all their sins. In addition, he asked that no donation would be required. At that time, this favor was only granted for going on a crusade, or for going on pilgrimage to Rome or St. James of Compostella and making a significant donation to a church there.

Francis was a prophet in the tradition of Moses & Micah. In his day, this favor was called an indulgence, but - unlike the clergy who later angered Luther - he was not *selling* it either by requiring someone to go to war to fight Muslims or to make a donation to a church in order to receive it. The Bishops were shocked that Pope Honorius had granted that favor, probably because it undermined their effectiveness in getting people to fight in the current crusade.

Down through the centuries the feast became known as the "Feast of the Pardon." In 1993, Sr. Anna and I were in Assisi on August 2. We saw how the feast is still celebrated. Young people walk from all parts of Italy to Assisi. They come with Friars and sisters, sleeping in schools and church halls along the way. The Bishop & the Mayor welcome them.

As their city or region is announced, mobs of them run up the piazza. The Italian police try to slow them down, but have little effect. They are singing and shouting, but when they move into the Church there is a profound silence. The change was so sudden and complete that it took our breath away.

There are no chairs except for priests who are hearing confessions. Those who have come into the church confess their sins - into the night and all of the next day. I have heard from Friars who have listened to them that real conversions often take place - with drug dealers, thieves and murderers changing their lives. They are truly being fed.

The passage from John's Gospel I just read follows the story of Jesus feeding a huge crowd. In Psalm 145, which we prayed this morning, we said: "*You open wide your hand & grant the desires of all who live*" (v. 16). In the Gospel passage from John, Jesus says, "*I am the bread of life.*" He is not just talking about ordinary food. He is talking about a profound transformation. I know a song that celebrates that profound truth in 3 languages:

♪ *A-men. El Cuerpo de Cristo. [the Body of Christ]*

A-men. La Sangre del Señor [the Blood of the Lord]

Eating your body, drinking your blood, we become what we receive, Amen, A-men. ♪

To truly live a life worthy of the calling we have received, we must do much more than repeat the ritual of Holy Communion or sit and listen to the Word of God, we are called and empowered to become what we receive. We are called to live the word we hear.

Jesus says in the Gospel: "*Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.*" What is this food? It is not healing signs that make us feel good, but the food of mercy, of restorative justice, of lasting peace.

Jesus also says, "*This is the work of God: have faith in the one God has sent.*" This faith is not about intellectual assent to a set of propositions, it is about living the way Jesus lived. We are called to become what we receive at the Lord's Table & to reflect the Word of God in our lives, not just hear it & think about it on Sunday, & forget it for the rest of the week.

Francis of Assisi was someone who lived the word of God. He was someone who became what he received in the Eucharist. During the 5th crusade in 1219, 3 years after the establishment of the Feast of the Pardon, Francis went to Syria. He found the crusaders were not only killing on the battlefield, they were looting and raping as well.

After challenging their behavior, Francis went to see the Sultan, Malik el Kamil. He expected to become a martyr, but he got to the camp alive and met with the Muslim leader. The both knew French, so they could talk without being understood by those around them.

As they shared their ideas & faith, they became friends. The Sultan said to Francis, "If all Christians were like you, there would be no war."

Francis was living a life worthy of the Gospel, at the risk of his own life. He was living the beatitude, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called the children of God.*" The crusades did not achieve lasting peace, & Christians & Muslims are still killing each other, but Franciscans to this day are welcomed by Muslims in the land where Jesus lived because Francis lived the truth in love, as we heard Paul say in today's reading, and because his brothers today are still living in love.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." When we pray "*Give us **this day our daily bread***" in the Lord's Prayer, we are praying not only for God to give us what we need; we are asking the Father for the **Bread of Life**. The words, "our **daily** bread," point back to the first reading from **Exodus** and the reference to that reading in the Gospel.

When the people of Israel are going through the desert and God provides manna, they have to gather it every day. The only exception is the day before the Sabbath, when they can gather enough for two days, so they can take more time to taste God's goodness on the Sabbath. If they gather more than that, the excess rots. They didn't listen, and tried to gather more than they needed. But in the Gospel story of feeding the 5,000, the apostles gathered the leftovers, so nothing would be wasted.

We too live in ways that consume more than we need. How much food is wasted every day all over the world? And the poor suffer, and the earth itself cries out. The world would be very different if more people only took what they needed from the earth and from each other, and used the surplus to feed those in need.

To live a life worthy of our calling includes caring for the earth. Pope Francis wrote a letter to the whole human family which was published in June. The 1st words in Italian are "Laudato Si' mi signore" which means "Praise to you, my Lord." Those are the 1st words of the Canticum of Brother Sun written by St. Francis. You have sung it - the hymn, All creatures of our God and King is that canticum set to music.

I know a 20th century musical setting of the same canticum:

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

That song sums up the core of the message of Pope Francis. The subtitle of his Encyclical is "On Care for our common home." His message is not just that we are risking the destruction of the earth itself if we do not change our wasteful ways; his core message is that we are called by God and Christ to care for our home and for the poor who are most harmed by climate change & pollution.

A few quotes from his message will give the spiritual foundation for the whole letter & reveal God's call to us in the 21st century:

"[The earth] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her." Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.

"We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters."

Jesus "entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross. From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole."

In conclusion, to live a life worthy of our calling might mean that we are called to challenge any preference for war over diplomacy, to challenge the practice of executing criminals & the frequency with which we kill unborn children; to challenge the sad reality of a culture of violence & a kind of addiction to guns.

To live a life worthy of our calling might mean that we have to look at our own lives and open our hearts to receive pardon for our sins, knowing that we are also called to forgive as we have been forgiven.

To live a life worthy of our calling might mean that we need to care for sister earth, as Francis named her, to recognize that we are part of nature and not above it, to become more conscious that everything is connected and all things are sacred, and to do what we can to care for the common good, the needs of the poor, sick & excluded among us and the land, water & air that sustain our lives on earth.

This last song is not only about receiving Christ in the Eucharist, it is about living the Word of God we take into our hearts:

♪ Receive who you are, do not be frightened. Come say "Amen" to all of your life.
Open your heart, come and be lightened, Singing I am the body of Christ.

And I am the body of Christ, Singing I am, dancing I am.

And I am the light of the world, 'Cause I see who lives in me, Yeah, Lord, I receive.

And I see the broken, and I see the weary, I breath in compassion and I breath out hope.
'Cause here in my heart, and here in my center, It's here that You enter all that I am.

And I am the body of Christ, Singing I am, dancing I am.

And I am the hope of the world, 'Cause I see who lives in me, Yeah, Lord, I receive. ♪