

Trinity 18 (8 October 2023)

“I THANK my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; that in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you:”

+In the Name...

Did you see the headlines this week? You are probably thinking something like, “Okay, I know from previous sermons that Father does not really follow the news, so I wonder what he is talking about...?” That is correct, the headline I am talking about has nothing to do with Biden or Trump. It has nothing to do with McCarthy and our lack of a Speaker of the House. I am not even talking about Israel and the atrocities going on there near the Gaza strip. No, the headline I am talking about came from *The Oregon Churchman*, or whatever politically correct title it has now. The headline is “The Closing of Three Churches in our Diocese” and the article explains that three congregations in the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon will be voted out of

existence at their diocesan synod at the end of this month. They include the congregation in Riddle, the congregation in Toledo, and Sts. Peter and Paul on SE 82nd Avenue. I was born and lived in Oregon until college but I had to look up where Riddle is: in Douglas County near Roseburg. But the other two congregations I feel like this Parish has or has had a connection to: The Continuing Church once had a mission in Toledo: St. Anne's. Fr. Costanzo, now the rector at St. Francis was their vicar. A former member of this parish bought the rectory of the Episcopal parish that is now closing and turned it into an art gallery.

Back in the day, Ss. Peter and Paul was the Anglo-Catholic parish on the East side of town, complementing the Parish of St. Mark on the West side. When I was in high school, I sang with the Evensong choir there, which was under the direction of Bill Schuster, the former organist of this parish. I felt sick to my stomach when I read about Sts. Peter and Paul. Now don't get me wrong, I am not a closet Episcopalian secretly believing we are still a part of our former communion. But those many services I sung there helped to shape my faith. As the Psalmist said, "my prayer set forth in [His] sight as the

incense.” Many requests for the intercession of Our Lady went up at the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, before I even really understood what that meant or who she was. There was probably a time 20 or 30 years ago when I could not have mentioned that parish from this pulpit without expecting some sort of blowback like, “Well, they deserve to close as they no longer teach the faith.” I have not met the Rector there, and it is entirely likely that she and I could find a great number of things on which we disagree. But I would like to think that she and I could agree on the necessity of the transforming love of Jesus Christ in our lives. And for that reason, I am truly sorry that three outposts of the Christian faith are closing; three places where the word will no longer be preached, the Sacraments will no longer be celebrated, and the broken will no longer be made whole. Their loss is not our gain.

It was a similar time in which St. Francis of Assisi found himself in the 13th century. He was born of wealthy parents; his father was a cloth merchant. Being doting parents, they indulged their son who liked all the same things that other young men of his time liked: colorful clothing, fine food, and pleasurable activities. Francis was a young man when he decided that there was

more to life than these worldly pursuits. He wished to join “Lady Poverty” as he called her, and eventually started an order where the members took the familiar vows of poverty chastity, and obedience. Francis took the vow of poverty to the extreme: Franciscans were a mendicant order, meaning they had to beg for their food. The Father of Western Monasticism, St. Benedict, had no use for the mendicant orders. His monks also took a vow of poverty, but that just meant that individually the brothers could not own anything. The Order, however, could accumulate great wealth, one of the issues that led to the English Reformation.

But before he left his old life, Francis began to lose interest in the worldly pursuits of his friends. After going on a pilgrimage to Rome, he sought refuge in a dilapidated chapel, San Damiano, near Assisi. There he prayed before the crucifix, a replica of which is in our parish hall, between the organ and the double doors. It was there that he heard God’s voice saying to him, “Francis, rebuild my Church; it is falling into ruins.” Francis looked around him at the dilapidated chapel and thought to himself, as we all likely would have, “Okay, no problem. Fix the leaky roof, the rotted windowsills, the stucco

wall, and we'll call it a day!" And fix it he did! Well, he sold some of his father's cloth in order to fund the repairs, resulting in his father taking him to court.

One account of the court case has Francis taking off his clothes during the proceedings, lest his father claim that he had stolen anything else. One has to love a saint with a flair for the dramatic! But the important part here is that while Francis heard the words of God, he did not quite get the application correct. God was not calling Francis to repair San Damiano, or at least not just that, but to rebuild His Church, that is, with a capital "c".

Brethren, this is what we are called to do in 21st century Portland, nearly 1,000 years since St. Francis heard the voice of God in that little chapel. We are called to rebuild the Church! Not just the roof and the stucco, although those are vitally important, but the Church as the Body of Christ.

In his letter to the Corinthians that we heard read for the epistle this morning, St. Paul tells them they must use their gifts for the betterment of those outside the Church. Utterances (St. Paul is referring to speaking in tongues) and knowledge (that is, of the faith) are gifts that should not be abused by showing others how important we are because we possess them, but

used to help point others to Christ. St. Francis' family had great wealth, but it got in the way of their devotion to God. Wealth, like any of God's blessings can serve as a help or a hindrance to following God and bringing others to Him. No, we are not all called to join a religious order and beg for our food. In fact, the vast majority of us are not. But, we are called to follow the example of St. Francis by heeding the word of God with as much devotion, energy and excitement as he did.

I suppose Sts. Peter and Paul would make a lovely community center, like the former Laurelwood United Methodist, or a nice museum, like the former Church of the Evangelists. But it was built for the worship of Almighty God and to bring souls to Christ, and for that purpose we must all work alongside St. Francis of Assisi to rebuild God's Holy Church

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