

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Epiphany VI b
February 12, 2006

Pr. Robert M. Goldstein
God Does the Miracles
Texts: Mark 1:40-45

Leprosy. The readings from the Sacred Writings of our tradition touch on leprosy. We now know that leprosy is identified more correctly as Hansen's disease after the Norwegian physician, Gerhard Hansen. It is a bacterium, and the sufferer can easily be treated medically as an outpatient and with proper diet.

And how has this change from a dreaded disfiguring disease to a simple medical treatment possible? By the slogging, incremental work of scientists and researchers -- just like Charles Darwin.

It's that simple. But it never really is. On this birthday of Charles Darwin we honor scientific truths and those searching for them -- even when they challenge what we believe. It's that simple. But it never really is because human ignorance, fear and political opportunism blur the sharp truths of scientific accomplishment.

Darwin's theory of natural selection is just that -- a theory based on careful observation of data. It may not be perfect but it is the best we have so far. It is not about God, although, to generations brought up on a too literal reading of the Genesis stories, the implications of Darwin's theory was and continues to be a deep shock of realization of our own mortality and of the mystery of life.

Our response to the readings from the Holy Scripture highlight just how far we have come through public education and scientific research and struggle. Yet we can still sense the fear and helpless despair people once fell into when leprosy and other diseases afflicted their communities and ours. That is why Jesus is connected here to a miracle of healing a leper. In his healing Jesus focuses us not on despair, but faith, not on fear, but hope. The purpose of the healing stories is to energize solutions not lead to the dead ends of despair.

This ancient healing story speaks to us so profoundly in that Jesus reached out and did the unthinkable, he touched the leper, and, in doing so, not only put himself at risk, he ended the cruel marginalization of an innocent victim, and declared that true community marginalizes no one but cares for its physically and mentally ill. Not so in our over-confident capitalism today. That is something of what these leprosy miracle stories mean for us today.

On this day we are also holding our annual meeting after worship. Can we make the connection between the implications of this healing miracle story and the state of St. Francis Church? I believe we can as we look to our vision to grow this congregation.

For if we focus on the faith and the hope that Christ brings to that leper and to his community, and not the worry and despair we bring to any question of growing this congregation, we will start the vision on the right foot.

Why do we need to grow? Well, why does a plant or a child need to grow? -- it's just the nature of things. But let me approach the miracle of a growing church in another way.

To an anthropologist I would describe a church as an ancient community of moral nurture, for both children and adults, and a healing community for anyone beaten up by life's tragedies and struggles. We have already seen those elements of healing a leper and moral nurture of the whole community in today's lessons.

At St. Francis, God nurtures us all to claim our wholeness as human beings, especially at present in regard to our sexual identity, and in our doing so, God heals us of the wounds we get along the way. We learn to lift up to one another and to God our simplest and our deepest yearnings, and we learn to let go what needs to be let go, and thus to receive the redemption of ourselves for a better San Francisco.

It is from this context of nurture and healing that we need to talk about growing this congregation. I prefer not to label this project of growing St. Francis as "evangelism" because, not only is that a tired word with such negative associations, it doesn't easily point to the miracle of Christ nurturing and healing within us.

Instead, I want to keep us focused on this miracle of Jesus: He stretched out his hand and touched the person, healing him. Jesus' whole person, body and soul, met another person as a partner in the pilgrimage of life -- not just another statistical new member, but a person like himself full of life, hopes, fears, dreams and some nightmares. That is the beginning of the miracle -- reaching out, person to person, with God healing us.

We do not need an evangelism committee. **We need to be an outreaching congregation.** Our outreach is not to first tell the story of Jesus, or the Bible, or even to critique Marxism. Our outreach is in reaching out our hands and shaking another with a genuine welcoming smile -- receiving them as mysterious as you are to yourself sometimes. Outreach means to listen, not to tell. Outreach means to receive with thanks, not to give. Outreach is to learn of God from this person, rather than the other way.

We have to put aside all notions of evangelistic imperialism -- as if we are Jesus and they are lepers. That attitude is so heavily freighted with Constantinian, Western, and arrogant assumptions -- that no longer work. That's another reason why the word "evangelism" is such a downer. Let's start off by saying we live by grace to receive our neighbor as a gift, a unique gift from whom we learn more about life. That's how St. Francis will continue to grow.

And then there are the stories. The power of the Bible to reach out and draw people in is in the stories. Ordinary people remembered these stories of their life with Jesus. And in the telling of these wonderful stories they relived and shared their joys with someone who made a real difference in the meaning of God.

Stories. I heard the wonderful story of Dale Johnson coming up to the communion rail adorned as lady from a Mozart opera in full court dress, wig, and long train. Picture it: as the last communion table walks back to their seats, the rail is empty. The organ still plays, expectation builds. Then Lady Dale walks majestically down the aisle, up the steps and to the rail. What an entrance! I wish I had witnessed it -- even if she would have upstaged me in my cope and chasuble! What a story. And you know what, in the joys of telling that story, someone said, "When I saw Dale, I knew this was the church for me!"

Those of you who remember that story of Lady Dale communing know it is not just humor. It goes much deeper. It shows Dale's openness to receive the body and blood of Christ exactly as Dale wanted to. Breaking more rigid social codes, we have the grace to honor and to still enjoy Dale's expression of freedom and joy in Christ. And that witness of Dale in turn reached out and brought another person into our community of nurture and healing.

Stories from living life. We can grow this congregation by living just as uniquely and authentically, by listening and receiving the visitor, the fellow traveler through life -- each with their own uniqueness -- learning about life and God from them. In that context, we can share our stories of life with one another -- both the joyous and the saddening, and so draw others into this Christian community of moral nurture and healing for our San Francisco community.

That state of this church is very good. But our vision to grow St. Francis will founder if it is just names and numbers. If we focus on being an outreaching church, as boldly as Jesus reached out; if we reach out to listen, to build genuine relationships with people, then we will also retell the ancient stories of Scripture and of this Church in ways that will draw others to the Eucharistic table. Let us reach out, let us listen and share. God will do the miracles.

Amen

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