

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

August 26, 2007

Text: Luke 13:10-17

Pr. Robert Goldstein

*“ Living in the City of God ”*

We have all come this morning to this little church on Church Street. But we have come to more than just that. We have come, as the second reading puts it so well, we have come:

*to the city of living God and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.*

You might say, “Well, I can’t see any of that!” Then, let me show you....

In the first reading Isaiah the prophet describes a New Jerusalem to a lost Israel where “if you offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness.” Every Friday and Sunday food is gladly offered to the hungry and light does rise in the darkness of urban life; the city of God in the earthly city scene. Don’t underestimate yourselves!

In the Gospel reading is the wondrous story of Jesus healing a woman crippled for 18 years. This is an extraordinary story showing that Jesus’ mission in life is to bring healing. What an extraordinary vision to have for one’s life! Most of us usually stumble upon that vision and then only partially in our later years. But healing is early at the core of Jesus’ life. What clarity and simplicity of vision!

A century later a plague will strike Rome and all who could, including the doctors, flee. But those crazy Christians stay behind caring for and comforting the afflicted and dying. Those early Christians become Christ to their generation with stunning effect. People become curious as to why the Christians put themselves at such risk. And so the church, the city of God, lightens the darkness and grows.

Through the long centuries the church nurtured the vision and promise of healing. When God finally gave us modern science, giving us the tools to figure out how diseases worked their woes, medical science and nursing have brought wondrous gifts of healing and promise.

The irony is that modern practitioners of the healing science, and especially their philosophers, look at this healing story in the Gospel and ridicule it. But the miraculous point is missed. Jesus is not competing with modern medicine, he is competing over something deeper: the purpose of your life.

What end shall I live for? Shall it be many homes full of many things? Shall it be self-importance? Or shall I devote my life to healing? Many who heard this miracle story over the centuries held to that devotion that eventually brought us miracles of modern medicine and

nursing. They stewarded their lives, their gifts, and their energies toward healing the world rather than just grabbing from it! That's true stewardship.

The first disciples learned from Jesus a deeper and simpler way of life. And these strange miracle stories are the way our first sisters and brothers tried to convey how extraordinary Jesus' vision for life really was. He was not about self-centeredness, not about that shallow modern disease of "whoever dies with the most toys wins." He was about how fragile human existence really is and, in the midst of all the real negatives of life and death; he focuses us on caring for the whole community of which we are a part. Even to the point of suffering and dying for it. Now that's the greatest stewardship of one's life!

This leads to an important development this week regarding Mother Teresa. Her private correspondence was published this week –against her specific wishes, in which she reveals deep doubts about God, her vocation and Jesus. The press has had a field day with this –respectful, but thinking this is newsworthy as a contradiction to her life.

But the press is quite ignorant about the nature of Christian faith –something you and I know a whole lot more about. Doubt is not a failing in the life of faith. Doubt is part of the life of faith. If there were no doubt it would be knowledge, not faith. Consider faith and doubt as two sides of the same coin, the coin minted by God with each one of us as our response to the Gospel. In my experience, the deeper the life of faith, the deeper the valleys of doubt. They come with the territory –not as something contradictory to it.

But let us also notice that Jesus heals this woman in the church –actually, in the synagogue. But it makes no difference. In that time disease was not only a physical or mental issue, it was a community one too. Illness meant you had to be separated from the community. Originally this was to protect the community from a contagious disease. But it morphed into a caste system based on the ugly assumption that if you were well you were righteous and if you were sick you had sinned. Your sickness was your punishment.

So in the heart of that community, the congregation, Jesus teaches that community that this poor crippled woman is a "daughter of Abraham," that is, a fully legitimate member of their community. The healing was that he restored her to her rightful and healing place in the community and thereby brought healing to the whole community. I suppose that is why we have this miracle story: Jesus teaches us the meaning of a true community –not based on class but on caring for the neediest and the marginalized.

You have come to a little church this morning that, in its recent history, has lived out that miracle story's meaning in welcoming LGBT people who once were certainly marginalized in our world. This little church became partners with Jesus' vision of true community in welcoming us as equal partners. See, you *have* come to the city of the living God and you are among innumerable angels in festal gathering.

That is not to say, of course, that the angels we can see are always angelic. We are not. We forget the vision. We are weak and wander backwards into ourselves as the total focus of our lives. But that's also why we are here today and why you have called a preacher, to remind us all that its not about membership, or any status, but about having heard a gracious way of life, about a community that forgives and tries to live out the call to healing. Being an angel means being a messenger of Christ's vision of healing.

But isn't it funny that the rulers of the synagogue, and the church authorities of our day, challenge this vision of an open and healing community in its core simplicity as an infringement of their church law? Your act of healing, Jesus, your vision, breaks church law. Then, by God's grace, let it be broken.

St. Francis, this little church, stands big and tall as a place in the city of God, not in the city of religious institutions nor in the cruel urban landscape. By God's grace we are living out Jesus' profoundly simple vision of healing through inclusion. There is still work to be done pulling the kicking and screaming ELCA back into the heart of the city of God. And beyond this issue there is the new challenge of retelling Jesus' great vision and story to the growing secular, narcissistic and spiritualistic cultures of our post-modern world.

This is where our Vision is leading us. You have called Dawn and me to lead with you where you have led the way. We have a future together being Christ to our neighbors in San Francisco, to the wider church wherever it is narrow, and to the new seemingly indifferent post-modern world. It is not complicated yet it can get complicated at times as we try to live like Jesus in this new century. We have an exciting future before us. Let us not look back, as truly great as the past was. Let us look into the future city of God and to those innumerable angels in festal gathering. Glory be to God in the highest! Amen

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