

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

December 9, 2007

Text: Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

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## “Grace and Stones”

Paul has it right about the Bible. In his letter to the Roman church, he guides us to see that the Scriptures “were written for our instruction.” That is, we can learn about God and about life from Scripture.

But the Christian life is more than Scripture. Paul says that we are to be steadfast to our baptismal promises, and by this steadfastness “with the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” So note, as if we really need to know, Paul places Scripture in the lives of God’s people, not on some pillar of distorted authority as some sort of inerrant book of laws.

Scripture is understood in the life of the people. And how does it speak to us this day, the second Sunday of Advent?

The instruction we get from Paul’s letter to the Romans, the encouragement we receive, is Paul’s prayer that God will give us the power to live in harmony with one another, just as Jesus Christ lived. Actually, in the two years now that I have been with you, I feel confident that God is really at work here, for there is a high degree of harmony at St. Francis church. It is not uniform harmony and it couldn’t be in any group, or family or congregation. It is a gracious diversity in harmony.

God’s Spirit is really at work in this church. And the proof for Paul is not in us, but in the one voice through which we worship God, the loving creator of Jesus Christ. It’s not numbers, important as they are on this pledge Sunday, but steadfastness to our baptismal promises and the constant grace of God, which nourishes us through the Scriptures and through life.

Now St. Paul has a very wide vision which Paul has received from Jesus’ teachings and Jesus’ cross: a vision wider than our own. And that vision is the reconciliation of the nations. For Paul understands that Jesus was born a Jew to confirm the promise made to Abraham and Sarah that in them all the nations would be blessed.

For Paul, this blessing in Jesus means not a merely purified Judaism, but the beginning of reconciliation between nations and their reconciliation with the Jews. Instead of destructive wars Paul envisions international peace in Jesus Christ. This is no small vision.

When the Emperor Constantine, the head of all the known world of that time, became a Christian many in the young church saw this as the fulfillment of Paul's vision. A Catholic church in control of the great Roman Empire. And so the city of Rome became forever associated with Christian faith. Roman Empire and Catholic Church became the great Roman Catholic Church.

Many now believed that Paul's vision of international peace and unity was upon them. We all know better. And so did St. Augustine who clearly saw the danger and the consequences. And so he wrote his huge City of God to teach that we live by grace not power, and we live in the City of God yet to come, not in the City of Rome that has arrived in all its vainglories.

I do believe that the Roman Church still tries to offer and live in Paul's great vision. But I am saddened by the way the hierarchy love the Roman power that is no more, than the Catholic grace that Paul envisioned. Such a love for maintaining privilege and power among the hierarchy has now come at a terrible cost in their rejection of the modern world –a rejection that was formulated at the first Vatican Council in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Vatican II, in the 1960's, was a brave attempt to become open to the modern world, to welcome its strangeness. But after the death of John XXIII that progress has been dismantled and St. Paul's great vision is no longer, practically, in their grasp. This is a great loss to the whole world. For we have a lot to learn from the Roman Church. They have a lot to offer to the world.

Yet it is from that great vision that Paul makes the practical connection to you and to me: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God." If you want a creed, well, here one is. Succinct, hand in hand practicality, and bearing a huge vision and doxology –just do it and by doing so you give God the glory!

That's not hard to do. And yet people take sides rather than joining hands and, therefore, do not truly welcome one another and therefore dim the glow of the glory of God. And why is this?

Well, there are a multitude of secondary reasons –tribalism, cultural misunderstandings, different contexts, personal failings, ambition, blindness, ignorance of one another and so on. But the primary reason is that division happens, rejection occurs, when we forget that we live by the grace of God –always, day in and day out.

We forget...but Christ says to us every week, "Do this in remembrance of me." Christ reminds us every week to remember to gracefully bring God's peace, a peace that can bring the world together.

But we forget and so we ordain clergy to remind us. But, as the fiery encounter in the Gospel reading reveals, even the clergy forget that we all live by grace and in grace.

When John saw the Sadducees and the Pharisees, he turned his prophetic ire on them:

*You brood of vipers! Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.*

John's point is that instead of living by grace, and teaching that promise of grace that gave Abraham his purpose in life, the clergy had turned in on themselves and had replaced grace with ethnic pride. And pride kills grace in any heart. Don't be so proud that you are a Jew that you cannot extend a hand of welcome to others. What a message for us too towards Jews, towards Muslims, towards anyone!

The point of being a Christian is to live by grace, not by commands, not by pride of any sort, and to gracefully receive your sister and brother in every stranger.

For those of us who are newer on the scene, St. Francis in that sense of grace opened up their eyes to the Castro in the 60's and lived truly by grace when they opposed the national church double standard of allowing heterosexual clergy to mate, while requiring homosexual clergy to be celibate. Celibacy in Luther's Church! How ungracious!

For opposing that injustice St. Francis was removed from the roster of congregations –not by the gracious will of God. But the struggle for justice is much further along now thanks to St. Francis and others. It's not over, but it is further along to the day of grace when all will welcome one another simply on the basis that God has brought us together. What a vision!

And now we at St. Francis need to continue to grow in grace. Let us widen our vision further towards Paul's great vision –embracing with humility and grace not only within the Christian community, but also in the other religious and secular communities with whom we share this city, this world and its problems. Let us so live by grace, so instructed by the Scriptures, that we gracefully receive the strangers in our midst as ones whom God sends to us.

Let us not turn in on ourselves with a kind of pride that is ungracious, unwelcoming and subordinating of others. For we have been baptized with more than water. We have been baptized by the Holy Spirit at that same time, who has infused our hearts with grace –a grace waiting to respond to the instruction of the Scriptures and the opportunity to receive the stranger. Let us continue to grow in that grace as we prepare for the advent of the Christ so that we may welcome Christ, even as we meet Christ in the stranger whom God graciously presents to us. What a vision! Amen