

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
21st Sunday after Pentecost B; 10.13.24; G. Miles Smith+

- He was born into a prosperous family.
- He was handsome, witty, and delighted in the luxuries of his life.
- He became a soldier and a prisoner-of-war.
- He received the first recorded instance of a stigmata on his body.
- He arranged the first live nativity scene in recorded history.
- He was deeply devoted to observing the Eucharist.
- He developed an deep love for animals and nature.
- He ended up founding three religious orders that still exist today: the “Lesser Brothers”, the “Poor Clares” for women; and the “Third Order of Brothers and Sisters” for lay men and women who are married or otherwise unable to leave their work in the world.
- He was ordained as a deacon, but never as a priest.
- A major city in California is named after him.
- He is the patron saint of Italy and one of the most venerated persons in the history of Christianity.
- His feast day as a saint is observed on October 4th and we are transferring that observance to this afternoon at 4pm for the Blessing of the Animals [at Grace].
- And, of course, I’m talking about...St. Francis of Assisi. |

And what is also timely about talking about St. Francis this morning is that he was himself inspired by the gospel story today and a similar one in the Gospel of Matthew (19:21). And yet, for most people--including most Christians--and even Jesus’ disciples at the time, this moment in Jesus’ ministry has largely been incomprehensible.

As we heard, this is what happened: When Jesus and the disciples were out and about, a man appeared before Jesus, knelt down and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And an exchange ensued in which we learn that the man, according to his own report, was a diligent observer of the Ten Commandments. And so it sounded like the man was in good shape to “inherit eternal life”...until Jesus concluded that the man in fact lacked “one thing”...and challenged the man to “go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor”. The man was shocked and went away grieving over such an idea. The disciples themselves were perplexed...and queried Jesus...to try to understand...but it isn’t obvious that they did. And I’m not sure we do either.

And yet Francis found this story of Jesus inspiring enough...to completely change his whole life. And the change in his life ended up rippling down through eight centuries...of times and places...unto this day. How could something so powerful flow...from a moment in Jesus’ ministry...which is so obscure?

- Why isn’t our private observance of the Ten Commandments...and our private virtues...enough to inherit eternal life?
- What does the poor...possibly...have to do with...our...personal...eternal life?
- Why is wealth...potentially...an almost insurmountable obstacle...to salvation?
- And just what constitutes wealth?

Wealth is very relative, of course. I used to think that this gospel story did not have much to do with me. For many years after I was first ordained in the 1981, I still lived like a student, and did not have much of anything. I mostly served churches of very modest means and I was paid very little. But, looking back from my vantage point now, I can no longer imagine that this story has nothing to do with me, for I am wealthier, by comparison than I was back in those days.

But still, it is not obvious why Jesus...and the New Testament as a whole...is so wary of wealth. And why is it such an important matter for our “eternal life”?

But when Francis made his wild decision to actually do what Jesus said, then there was some kind of incredible release of spiritual energy and compassion that entered the world...as he and his brothers and sisters in the faith...spread out and drew near to all the folks who lived where they were...who were mostly poor like they had become. People who had never felt “seen” before, never even imagined that their lives mattered—they felt “seen” through Francis and the brothers and the sisters. How many of us still hunger to be truly seen—in spite of our wealth...or the lack of wealth? Why aren’t people more important than wealth?

And what I would not have also expected from Francis is that his wild decision to step back from wealth...made him so attuned to nature. Francis not only could see anew the “poor”...but everything else alive in the world. Francis could not only recognize the shadow side of nature’s fallen glory...but the side of nature which still endlessly proclaims the glory of God. How many of us still hunger to know that glory of God...like we once did...when we were young...and ran carefree through fields and woods...in our neighborhoods...building forts...playing in creeks...catching lightning bugs...playing in fallen leaves, and luxuriating in snow? Why isn’t nature more important than wealth?

There is so much about the gospel story that I still don’t understand. But it does seem to me that in the obscure challenge of Jesus to that man...that there was a kind of disruption that God knows we need to hear...even when we don’t know what to do with it. It is like we need to be awakened from a kind of pervasive amnesia...that any kind of wealth can cast over us. We don’t know—until we know—just how much we need Jesus...and others like Jesus...to disrupt our assumptions about what matters...and lay bare before us...so much more in the world...that calls for our attention and care...than just our own private stuff. When Church calls us out from our private stuff with annual stewardship campaigns and other invitations to generosity, it is all a modest step toward meeting this obscure challenge of Jesus.

Apparently, if we are to venture to believe Jesus...and believe St. Francis...in the world beyond our private virtues and our private stuff...there moves... a larger spiritual reality of God...in the midst of the shadows that linger there too. And there...in that larger spiritual reality of God beyond us...is actually our heart’s true desire...yet to be discovered.