

Jeremiah 22:13-16
Psalm 148:7-14
Galatians 6:14-18
Matthew 11:25-30

Feast of St Francis (*transferred*)
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
October 6, 2019
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To Live as Francis Lived

As many of you know, we returned just yesterday from Italy, the home of St Francis of Assisi, whom we celebrate today. While we didn't visit the town of Assisi, San Francesco, in Italy, is everywhere present. We encountered many Franciscan churches on our pilgrimage and in our last week in Venice, stayed just up the fondamente from a Franciscan monastery. Nearly every day we saw Franciscan brothers walking along the fondamente, brown robes blowing in the wind, and every one of them exuding quiet joy and deep peace.

We made our pilgrimage to Tuscany to cook, to explore food, faith and place. We stayed on two working farms for most of our time away and visited several places where people are working in harmony with the land and its wild creatures, with the wind and the rains and the neighbors around them. We learned so much from each other and from the people we met, be they farmers, chefs, artisans or monks.

I now know that Parma ham, that gorgeous prosciutto we love so well, can only be produced in the hills where the wind sweeps through and temperatures aren't too hot. As it turns out, the wind is the essential ingredient in Prosciutto Parma. So while modern producers can control the diets of the pigs they raise, the amount of salt used around the bones of the ham, the kind and amount of mold that must grow to create the unique flavor... the perfect sweetness of Parma Prosciutto is a result of the natural drying that happens when the wind is just right, wafting perfectly through the curing rooms because Papa knows just exactly how much to open the windows when the wind blows the way it wants to blow today. It's all about the humidity with Parma Prosciutto, humidity that is controlled not with mechanics, but by people who have lived on a particular hill for so long that they have befriended the wind and work in companionship with it.

At Villa Antinori we cooked with the amazing and wonderful Duccio, learning to make my very favorite pasta – it's called pici and is only made in Tuscany. The sauce for the pasta could not have been simpler – Parmigiana Reggiano so finely grated you can see through it, a little pasta water and black pepper. We made a gourmet version of Nutella and the most perfect pizzas too. And while pici-making was my dream come true, it was the time we spent in the vineyard, in the shadow of the beautiful 4th century abbey of Passignano, that spoke most vividly to me. As we stood atop the hill, amidst grapevines that went on as far as we could see, we listened to our guide speak of the importance and history of the place. She spoke of the abbey and the monks who still live there, men who have been cultivating and growing grapes, making wine and stewarding their land, praying and worshipping at Passignano for centuries. These monks remain the guardians of this place, of its history and its treasures and they work and live alongside the Antinoris. We learned about the dirt and the sun and the way the light changes, of

how the light changes the grapes and ultimately creates the gorgeous flavor of their wine. This wasn't simply a description of terroir, it was a description of a way of life. The Antinori family has more vineyards than any other grower in the Chianti region and like the prosciutto producing Lanfranchi family, they work in concert with the land and the creatures they share that land with. As we were listening, our guide looked down the hill at the wild boar scampering into the vineyard, rolled her eyes and began to describe the boars and the damage they seem to delight in doing. They are clumsy creatures and they knock down trellises, uproot vines and generally crash around making a mess of things. She spoke of the human error that created an imbalance in nature which resulted in boars in the vineyards. She didn't disparage the wild beast and she didn't try to stop it. She spoke of the Antinori's efforts to correct that imbalance. They don't set traps and they don't put up fences. They wait for the hunters in hunting season and live with the boars, the wind and the rains and the neighbors around them. Their primary intervention takes the form of rosebushes surrounding the vineyards... they are impacted by disease before the grapes are, so they serve as signals if something's gone awry. The Antinori's help their neighbors to be good stewards of their land too, recognizing that property lines have nothing to do with the natural world and that everything we do impacts everyone and everything around us. The circle of life is a holy thing for these people, and as natural as can be.

There are so many stories like these from our pilgrimage to Italy, stories of people who live in communion with creation. We didn't set out knowing that we would become infinitely more attuned to the deep connection between people and place, any more than Francis set out to become the founder of a religious order that recognized the sun as our brother and the moon as our sister. But our journey turned out to be profoundly Franciscan. And while I can't say we followed the Franciscan way of poverty, we did come to see God's glorious creation a whole lot more like Francis did. And for that, I am profoundly grateful.

Most people recognize St Francis. They may think he has more to do with gardens and birdbaths than he does with living a life that is deeply attuned to God's delicate and wondrous creation, but people do see Francis as a champion of nature. It's probably all those birds - birds on his head, birds on his arms, always the birds. People recognize Francis by the birds, just as they recognize his tired brown robe and his funny hair. Francis is a romantic figure for most of us, yet his life was far from romantic.

Like so many saints, Francis grew up in a privileged, secular world. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant and his mother a French noble-woman from Provence. Francis grew up wanting for nothing and grew into a young nobleman who was the darling of Assisi society. He was a charmer at all the parties, the wittiest of conversationalists and probably voted the least likely to become a monk. He wasn't a bad man. He simply loved pleasure and was happily ensconced in his very privileged life. He wanted to add "hometown hero" to his accolades so he joined a military expedition that turned out to be a miserable failure. Francis was held captive for over a year, and became gravely ill. Perhaps it was his illness that caused him to turn inward and contemplate more deeply a life in God. He eventually returned home to a life of internal conflict. Francis was drawn to the poor, and he gave away not just his own money but also his father's. You can imagine the problem that created, so Francis took refuge with the priest at a little church called San Damiano. The story goes on and you can read about Francis in many

places, but for us, it is enough to know that Francis ultimately gave himself over to God in complete and utter surrender and the whole wide world was changed because of it.

And that's where we think we go our separate ways, yes? Francis gave up everything, every penny, every privilege, every bit of clothing, right down to his shoes, then he walked around in the world preaching to birds, taming wolves, freezing cold and preaching the gospel simply by living his life. That isn't something we're likely to do, so probably we're not going to be famous and change the world, and no one will have statues of us with birds on our heads in their gardens.

But it isn't so. Our pilgrimage to Italy showed me so very much about how we really can be like Francis in ways that are as authentic to us as Francis' ways were to him. You see, Francis wasn't trying to live the life of any other saint, he wasn't trying to be a saint at all. Francis came to know and to love the living God through the experiences of his life and the very same gospel you and I read from today. He took God at God's word, and fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the sick. He took nothing for his journey (something I need to remember the next time I go to Italy), allowing himself and his monks only two tunics and no shoes. It wasn't that he was a fundamentalist, or even a literalist. Francis was a realist who recognized the realness of God in the gospel. He was ridiculed by many, and from what I read, he didn't seem to care. Eventually his subversive way of following Jesus attracted many who knew the world they inhabited simply wasn't right. Francis and his brothers, as well as Clare and her sisters had a deep recognition of the holiness that infuses all of creation and they lived their lives in gratitude for the sacred in everything. That is something that we can do too.

In all of my reading of San Francesco, what stands out so brightly is that God calls each one of us to a radically authentic life. No matter where or what we came from, God will use the experiences of our lives to prepare us to do our particular part in loving the world back into wholeness. One of the many important things Francis has to teach us is that beautiful opportunity to use absolutely everything we have – all our privilege, our power, our money, all of our gifts, to the glory of God and for the well-being of all of God's creation. Francis did just that and we can too.

God isn't calling us to live Francis' life, God is calling us to live our lives in the most radically authentic way we can. God has given each one of us gifts just as unique as the gifts God gave Francis, each one of them to be used to change the world. Sometimes we demure, thinking we shouldn't toot our own horns, shouldn't share the best stuff we've got, shouldn't be awesome. But God made us awesome – each and every one of us and God did that so we can use all that awesomeness to change the world. Yes, it's true we need humility, Francis taught that too. But really, when we can balance getting all of our goodness out into the world with the humility that recognizes all of our gifts as gifts from God TO BE GIVEN FOR GOD, well, I think if we could all do that, the world would be a very different place.

Francis would be the first to tell you not to hide your light under a bushel. He also said "Preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words." Whether you're a grape grower or a

cheesemaker, a bread baker or prosciutto crafter, whether you're old or young, rich or poor, no matter who you are, God gave you just as many gifts as God gave Francis or anybody else. So offer them. Offer them in gratitude and humility and in harmony with all creation. Offer them without considering the outcome. Offer them knowing that God is working in you and the whole wide world is waiting for what only you can offer. Amen