

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 9, 2022
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Offering

Did you know that our sabbatical journeys, yours and mine, were created to offer us something of a mirrored experience? You were here on our island, steeping yourselves in the cultures all around you, trying to connect more deeply with them, to learn some of the many wonderful and valuable things they have to teach us and to offer what we as the community of St Barnabas could offer. I was on another island, the island of Hawai'i doing much the same thing.

From the time I was a child growing up in Hawai'i I loved all things Hawaiian, particularly the myths, legends, spirituality and aloha 'aina, the deep love of the land. On my sabbatical, I wanted to connect more deeply with the Hawaiian culture and to learn more of the wonderful and valuable things it has to teach me and all the world. My pilgrimage to Hawai'i, was deeply personal. Pilgrimage is different from travel, different from sabbatical. Pilgrimage is about longing, a holy longing that won't let go of us until we engage it. There seems always to be a quest involved in pilgrimage, a quest that will only end when the vow is fulfilled, the penance completed, the sacred attained, the question resolved, the soul restored.

Pilgrimage requires a willingness to open ourselves to whatever comes our way simply because it is part of the path to our longing. Pilgrimage takes time. It is often fraught with difficulty or even danger. But then that's what happens when we give ourselves wholly to a thing, when we cease trying to control what's going on around us and become willing students. Pilgrimage, at least for me, is about attending to the soul's deepest desire, something we often can't name until our pilgrimage is ended, until we've taken in the sacred from the people and places we've been.

My beloved Jim often says "The sacred is made by the attention we give it." That doesn't mean things aren't sacred until we pay attention to them, but it does mean we can be surrounded by the sacred and miss it because we're not paying attention. That became clear to me on one particularly melancholy day in Hawai'i when I was reminded of a time I had been most unkind with myself. I took myself off to the Place of Refuge, the most sacred land I have ever stood on. That land, Puuhonua Honaunau is now a National Park that exists for our learning about ancient Hawaiian religious life, the kapu system, forgiveness and second chances. Kapu refers to a series of prohibitions that separated the clean from the unclean, much like the Jewish Law we read about in scripture. Kapu was very strict, and people were required to live by the letter of the law. If you broke the rules of the system, you could be killed. Puuhonua, the Place of Refuge, was a place for second chances. It was very hard to get to and very holy, but if you had committed any sort of crime and could get yourself there, you could become a sort of novice,

sitting at the foot of the priest, learning and relearning what was needed to go back into the world, holy and whole. If you got yourself to a puuhonua and did your work, all was forgiven and you really did go back into the world a new person with a second chance. It was a good place for me to go that day – it was a day I wanted a second chance at kindness. I went very early, before the park opened so I had to walk through the parking lot and down the service road in order to get to the beach. The moment I stepped onto the sand, I saw a piece of coral in the shape of a heart. I picked it up and set it on a rock so others could see it too. A short time later I was walking on the lava and saw a stone in the shape of a heart. I picked that up and set it apart too. I'll just say that by the time I'd finished my walk on the beach of second chances I'd found five heart shapes that marked my path like crumbs for Hansel & Gretel.

There are so many stories like this from my pilgrimage this summer, stories of attending to the sacred and living in communion with creation. For Hawaiians, nature is everything – they call themselves keiki o ka 'aina – children of the land. 'Aina is not just the ground Hawaiians stand on, 'aina is a deeply emotional and ancient concept that influences everything for the Hawaiian people. Hawaiian spirituality teaches that humankind and nature were siblings born to the same parents from the beginning of time.

I think St Francis was very like the ancient Hawaiians, with his brother sun and sister moon, brother air and sister water. He lived with the same regard and in the same sort of harmony with nature as the ancients. And in my pilgrimage into the heart of Hawai'i, I came to see God's glorious creation a whole lot more like Francis and the Hawaiians did. And for that, I am profoundly grateful.

At home, we love Francis so much that in our garden we have Francis 1 and Francis 2. Most people recognize St Francis, if only in the garden. He's known for preaching to the birds much more than he's known for living a life that was deeply attuned to God's delicate and wondrous creation. People see Francis as a champion of nature, probably because of all those birds - birds on his head, birds on his arms, birds at his feet. People recognize Francis by the birds, the tired brown robe and the funny hair. Francis is a romantic figure for many, 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. He wanted for nothing as a child 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.

When Francis finally returned home his life was filled with internal conflict. He was drawn to the poor, and soon gave away not just his own money but also his father's. You can imagine how well that went over. Francis took refuge in 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 ultimately, he gave himself over to God in complete and utter surrender... and that changed the world.

Francis gave up everything, every penny, every privilege, every bit of clothing, right down to his shoes, then walked around in the freezing cold, preaching to birds, taming wolves and living the gospel simply by living his life. Those aren't things we're likely to do, so we tend to set Francis on his garden pedestal thinking we can't be anything like him. 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 – well, the statue part is so, but my beautiful teachers in Hawai'i showed me that 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 God through the very same gospel you and I read from today, the gospel and the experiences of his life. He took God at God's word, surrendered himself fully and helped the people around him to do the same. Francis recognized the truth of God in Christ Jesus, and not only understood, but lived out God's upside-down world where the poor are rich and the last and the least are the first. Francis 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 sacred that infuses all 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 about St Francis, what stands out is the reality that God calls each one of us to a radically authentic life. No matter where or what we came from, God will use us to do our very particular part in loving the world back into wholeness. One of the many important things Francis has to teach us is that we're to use all that we have – all our privilege, our power, our money, all our gifts, to the glory of God and for the well-being of all of God's creation. Francis did 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 gift 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 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, that changes the world.

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." 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

