

Sermon for October 4, 2009
The Rev John A. Baldwin

The Sunday closest to Oct. 4th is often observed as St. Francis Day, a day honoring a saint who is one of the most admired, yet perhaps least imitated in the Christian Faith – Francis of Assisi - who embraced poverty as his way of living. Later this morning, at our 11 a.m. service, we will be holding our annual Blessing of Pets in his honor, as the patron saint of animals.

Francis was born in the late 12th century, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. As a young man he was captured in battle and imprisoned. Returning home, he became increasingly dissatisfied with his life. On a pilgrimage to Rome, he was deeply moved by the beggars outside St. Peter's Basilica and exchanged his clothing with one of them, discovering in so doing not only the hardships of being penniless, but also a surprising feeling of freedom and joy. On returning to Assisi he had a falling out with his family and retreated to the mountains to minister to lepers and build a church. Before long, a community of men gathered around him who, like Francis, embraced "Sister Poverty". Long after his death, Franciscans continue to practice his compassion for the poor.

I had occasion a few weeks to see again what I consider to be one of the most exquisitely beautiful films ever made, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* by Franco Zeffarelli. It captures wonderfully Francis' joy and delight in the natural world. Here was a man who not only marveled at the beauty of a field filled with red poppies, but who also fostered deep trust with men and women in whom he saw the presence of Jesus Christ. His life was filled with exuberance even in the midst of suffering.

I had the blessing of having a friend during my college years who deeply shared Francis' joy in creation. My friend Joe carried a note-book wherever he went. When something caught his fancy he would jot down notes like "trees cackling like geese" or "ribbons of moonbeams on the ground." There was about Joe a child-like delight in new discoveries, awe in the presence of mystery and a sense that adventure was just around the corner.

I believe this quality of wonder, imagination and creative spontaneity is what Jesus had in mind in our Gospel reading this morning when he gathered young children around him and said, "Anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Before having children of my own I didn't fully understand this, and now as a grandparent I am rediscovering it all over again. There is something about young children that absolutely inspires joy and rejuvenation. Their delight in new discoveries, enthusiasm about little things, the trust and confidence they place in us, are all reminders that we lose things of great value in our journey towards adulthood. Jesus was not calling his disciples to be childish, but to be child-like in their openness to joy and delight in the world around them.

Joy is the grandest and most powerful of all the human emotions, yet it is also the most fleeting. Sheldon Van Auken, in his book *A Severe Mercy*, wrote: "What makes life worth living is, precisely, the emotions....and the highest and purest is joy that is discovered in love....But great joy through love always seems to go hand in hand with pain."

When I think back on some of the moments in my own life when I have felt joy most keenly, I realize that they have often been brief and tinged with some pain. I think of the joy I felt when my daughter Sarah was born and the anxiety that came soon afterward as she was whisked off to the neo-natal unit. I remember the joy of being called here to Emmanuel as your Rector, and the

anxiety of carrying two mortgages with the harsh Minnesota winter arriving and our house in the Midwest sitting empty. I frequently experience the joy of welcoming someone to worship on a Sunday only to feel disappointment if that visitor doesn't return the following Sunday.

This seems to be very much a part of life. We find ourselves tugged between moments of delight and sobering realities that threaten to rob us of the glory of joy. Put in theological terms, we are constantly being pulled back and forth between pre-Resurrection and post-Resurrection faith. Pre-resurrection faith is one that is lived in hope and expectation, but in uncertainty. The disciples felt that in Jesus they were in the presence of a holy man who brought them close to God, and inspired confidence. But was he really the Son of God? Could his vision of the Kingdom of God stand up against the harsh realities of sin and death? Post-Resurrection faith is faith lived in joy and certainty that Jesus is Lord, the Son of God. God has raised him to new life! Alleluia.

The principalities and powers of this world would rather we lived with pre-Resurrection faith. Hopeful, yet uncertain, dragged down by the realities of life...unable to truly feel and experience joy.

Karl Jung once asked a Pueblo Indian chief his opinion of the white man. "White men always seem upset", the chief responded. "They are always looking for something, with the result that their faces are covered with wrinkles." He added that white people must be crazy because they think with their heads, and it is well known that only crazy people do that. Jung asked in surprise how the Indian thought, to which the chief replied that naturally he thought with his heart.

Sheldon Van Auken writes elsewhere in *A Severe Mercy*, "The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians when they are somber and joyless; when they are self-righteous and smug; when they are narrow and repressive. Then it is that Christianity dies a thousand deaths."

As Christians, I believe we are called to a post-Resurrection faith.... one that is lived in confidence and joy...one in which we think with our hearts, allowing joy to linger and strengthen us, opening ourselves to the vulnerability of love. Our literature and scripture are filled with biddings to move towards joy. I share a few of them with you in closing.

"Behold I bring you tidings of great joy." (Luke 2:10) "This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24) "O be joyful in the Lord all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song." (Jubilate) May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13)