“Francis, rebuild my Church!”

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Matthew 6:25-33 ~ October 3, 2021

Francesco Bernadone was a restless young man, unable to find his calling. He jousted as a knight in armor, his father was eager for him to succeed in the lucrative family business, but the lives of lepers and outcasts tugged at his heart. One day he entered the little church of San Damiano near his home town of Assisi. Kneeling before a large wooden crucifix painted in the Byzantine style of an icon, he asked, “Show me what you want me to do with my life.” And the Lord answered! Repeated three times: “Francis, rebuild my church.”

First, he took it literally; he repaired the crumbling building. He soon realized God was calling him to a much deeper undertaking. That was in the year 1204. In the centuries before and since, Christ has called the children of God to rebuild the church, the body of the faithful. Now, as then, the call is both literal and far deeper.

Dear Ones, we have taken care of the building. Hip! Hip! Hooray! Long overdue, we have been good stewards of the church entrusted to our care in our generation. We did it carefully. We did it right. We did it to serve those who will follow. This is a good and glorious thing; may it be pleasing in God’s sight.

Now, dear Ones, a deeper task is before us. The church, as with so many aspects of our lives, is changing. In a recent blog, adrienne maree brown, a leading afro-feminist voice in restorative justice, speaks succinctly of the intersection of climate, race, covid, and the growing economic chasm. Says she, “It’s all crumbling, concurrently. We are living through both the devastating fall of systems that guarantee life, and the necessary fall of systems that uphold violence.”

Regardless our individual ideas and perspectives about what is most important and what is the best way forward, we all know that the world and society we will pass on to the next generation will look markedly different from the one bequeathed to us.

Focusing on the church, recent research confirms that among Gen Z – those age thirteen to twenty-five – 78% identify as spiritual, yet an almost equal number say they neither trust nor affiliate with religious institutions. One report observes, “The coming generation may be investing more in faith because of stress and loss. After a year navigating the COVID pandemic (March 2020-2021), over a third of young people (35%) said their [faith became stronger](https://religionnews.com/2021/05/31/gen-z-lost-touch-with-faith-communities-during-pandemic-but-kept-the-faith-says-study/), while only 11% said their faith became weaker. Even more, 46% started new religious or spiritual practices during this time, far more than the 27% who stopped religious practices.” (end quote) (Packard & ter Kuile, Religion News Service, 9-23-21)

Is this consistent with your experience? During the past eighteen months, have you sought God’s light and grace in new ways or developed what you might call new spiritual practices? I have. Of necessity, we are all creating new patterns at home, at school, at work – how we socialize, play, shop, learn, travel – and how we pray. We have new awareness and responses to the climate, race, the political landscape, and the literal distance or proximity of our relationships.

What new ways have you found to nourish your soul? And with whom? Do you feel called to live differently? Who or what has been for you a source of grace? (Even now, I’m imagining ways we can have conversation together around questions such as these, to share what we’re finding. Please let me know if you have ideas, or want to participate.) Perhaps, as Jesus’ taught, you worry less about what you will eat or drink or wear these days. Perhaps, you look in new ways at the birds of the air and consider the lilies of the field. Perhaps you are wondering in new ways what it means for you to strive first for the kingdom of God.

Of paramount interest to me as rector and pastor of this flock, is that we support one another as we navigate this new terrain, and that we open ourselves to ways we might be called to unbuild and rebuild. I’d like to say that I hope we’ll all stay together, that many more will join us. I feel I can say this with integrity insofar as I am truly attending to our respective and collective spiritual well-being. I don’t know what this means for the institutional church, but I believe deeply that community is a core ingredient of spiritual vitality; history is full of the stories of God gathering and regathering the beloved.

I keep thinking about this season in our lives through the lens of the Exodus – the forty year trek of the Hebrew people as God led them out of bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt into the Promised Land. Rich in detail. Escape through the Red Sea, on the run from Pharaoh’s army. Confusion and loss. Hunger met by Manna from heaven. Idolatrous worship of a golden calf. Ten commandments come from God.

At what point did the people change? Somewhere along the way, during all those twists and turns, they became the people of God. Their orientation shifted, forever. They realized they were not the center; Yahweh, God was the center – the beginning and the end. Surely, they thought and talked among themselves. ‘I sure do miss the old days! Yeah, not me; the old days weren’t so great, and I kind of like sleeping under the stars. Don’t you miss the food? Sure, but I’ve found that I am more sensitive now to the people among us who are really having a hard time.’

You and I – individually, collectively – we’re on the way. We have left forever the place we were a mere eighteen months ago. We don’t yet know what the promised land will look like or when we might get there. Are we at the beginning, the middle, or the end? Have we changed yet? Has God remade us? Or is that still to come? New priorities and strategies are emerging. We are asking about sustainability, inclusion of all persons, of restorative justice. And the younger generations don’t see these issues as separate topics; it is all of the same cloth. As we make our way, now as then, our every move – our laughter and tears, our heart-break and joy, are all seen and held within the eternal love of God. But can we even locate ourselves, out here in the wilderness? Can we describe where we are? I am not sure.

Being unsure about my location in the vast eternal arc of life, love, and God, prompts me to move in close. We cannot know how the story of race in America will end. Neither do we know the path we will ultimately take as stewards of God’s creation – this stunningly delicate, resilient, take-off-your-shoes, drop-to-your-knees beautiful creation. Will we act in time, and for whom? Not knowing these vast things, I can start each day close in: show me God, how to live your love today.

Here’s what this looks like. Early in the pandemic, one of the residents of Goodwin House, an Episcopal continuing care residential community in Northern Virginia, learned that the caregiver who attended to her most intimate daily needs was a migrant at risk of being deported. Not surprisingly, almost all the caregivers and other staff – from Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Jamaica, Haiti – were in jeopardy.

Petula Dvorak, who told this story in the Washington Post a couple of weeks ago (9-20-21), reports, “One of every four workers in long-term care facilities are immigrants. They are about 17 percent of the nation’s entire medical workforce. Thanks to the forces of economics and geopolitics, most of the folks taking care of us, our parents and our grandparents are immigrants.”

Guided by one of the elderly residents trained as a social worker and familiar with immigration processes, the residents of Goodwin House pooled together funds, skills, and resources. They worked with the staff, step by step through the bureaucratic red tape and logistical obstacles, filing forms, tutoring in the US Constitution and the Federalist papers. They exercised the same attention to detail that the staff exercised in caring for them.

Along the way, each learned stories of the lives of the others. Said one cafeteria worker, “I never had grandparents growing up; now, I have so many.” To which, one resident responded, “Many [who work here] come from cultures where seniors are more revered than they are here. It’s mutually beneficial.” Through this effort, the nearly ninety employees of Goodwin House have become nearly ninety American citizens. Travelling through this pandemic, they discovered one another.

I don’t know how far we have to go on this journey. I don’t yet know the myriad ways Christ is calling us to rebuild the church for the next and current generations. But I do know that we are called to live God’s love – today and together. And I do know that means we are called to start close in, with the first step. I know that today, I can pray in the words of St. Francis, as we all will pray in just a few minutes: “Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is despair, hope.”