

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, October 3, 2010.

Texts for the Feast of St. Francis: Galatians 6:14-18, Psalm 148, Matthew 11:25-30

One of the blessings of being Episcopalians is that our parish church is part of a wider community of Episcopal churches. A couple of years ago, our region, our Diocese of North Carolina, decided at its annual convention to encourage parishes and missions to set aside a cycle, a season, of worship that would focus on God's creation. St. Luke's begins today our first observance of a creation cycle. Over the next month the Sunday worship readings, prayers, music, and preaching will draw our attention to the faith that God is the creator and lord of heaven and earth. We are creatures of God, along with all other things. We need to appreciate and care for all that God has made. Our scripture readings and collect prayer today were specially chosen in memory of a saint of the Church who deeply appreciated the wonder of God's creation, Francis of Assisi. His feast day is tomorrow. Francis, as you may know, renounced his life as the son of a rich merchant and lived in poverty as a servant of God. Tales are told of his ability to preach even to the birds and to converse with wild animals. Francis felt so close to creation that called the sun a beloved brother and the moon a sister. He saw God in all things. During our season of creation, we will hope to be drawn into greater communion with all that God has made.

We live in a time when oil spills and global warming and so many urgent environmental concerns reveal how careless we have been with God's precious creation. As we begin this special season of worship, it would certainly be appropriate to begin with a confession, a litany of our sins against God and mother earth. I want to begin, however, in a different place. I believe that our sins against creation, our destructiveness and wastefulness, come from a lack of appreciation. We lack appreciation that each creature of God is so special, each rock and hill so wonderful, even each grain of sand, each blade of grass. More importantly, though, we lack an adequate appreciation of God's greatness. If we truly understood the wonderful nature of God our creator, our Lord, we would not be so casual and so selfish with the things God has made. So perhaps rather than with confession, we can begin our season of creation with a desire to know better the One to whom we confess, the One whom Jesus addresses as "Lord of heaven and earth," the One about whom the psalmist cries, "Praise the Lord from the earth...his splendor is over earth and heaven." If we can more deeply understand what it means to "praise the Lord" we may more deeply feel our kinship with all creatures of God. If we can more profoundly praise the Lord, we may more profoundly repent of our sins and turn from destructive ways.

"Praise the Lord." Those three words are so familiar to us in the Church. We say them. We sing them. We hear them over and over again, but what do they really mean? Praise the Lord. Here in the south we sometimes take the three simple syllables, "praise – the – Lord" and turn them into four or five: "Pa-ray-ease the Law-ord!" By making it sound more impressive, we make up for the fact that many of us have little idea what we are saying. What is a Lord, anyway? St. Francis, who lived in the 12th century in Europe, probably had a better idea about lordship when he wrote "Most high, all-powerful, good Lord, yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing," when he said, "Lord, make us instruments of your peace." Lords were more common in Francis' time. Lords were masters in an economic system based on land ownership. A lord owned land and controlled the people who worked it. If you farmed, you paid your lord part of what you raised or the proceeds from its sale. Some lords were good. Many abused their power and their tenants.

Therefore, for some of us the term, "Lord," is a bit problematic. We do not want to associate the

almighty, merciful, loving God with a class of medieval, male landowners. "Praise the Lord" makes it sound like we are back on the manor, little serfs begging the master for mercy. We are not mere peasants, and God is not just a male, master type. God is nurturing and caring. God is as much a mother as a father. God created us, but does God control us? We are not God's slaves but God's children.

Maybe we keep using "Lord," because it is so familiar. We cannot imagine church without "Lord," or maybe we are not yet able to break free from male-dominated language and leadership. Maybe one day we will worship God without words like "Lord" that recall injustice in human history. Rather than get rid of words like Lord that are sometimes problematic, though, I try to look for fresh meanings in old language. As I was pondering what it means to "praise the Lord," I went and looked up where the word, "Lord" comes from. The English word, "Lord" comes from an old word that sounded very different from but basically boils down to a combination of the words "loaf" and "ward" A "lo-rd" was the loaf warden, the one in charge of guarding and distributing loaves of bread. As I mentioned, the peasants owed their lord some portion of their produce, perhaps one sack of grain for every ten. A wise lord would not simply sell the bread-producing grain, and pocket the money. A wise lord would make sure to preserve enough grain to sustain the people in times of famine or during a long winter. A good and merciful lord would make sure that no one was allowed to starve. A just lord would see to it that the grain was distributed fairly. A mighty lord would defend the store of grain against thieves. The lord, as warden of loaves, was the keeper of bread, the protector of that which could sustain life.

No wonder, then, we give the name "Lord," to Jesus Christ, who called himself the bread of life. No wonder, then, that we call the maker of heaven and earth, "Lord" since God not only created everything that is, God continues to care for and manage it so that all God's creatures may prosper. "Lord" is a limited term, but we call God a wise, good, merciful, just, and mighty Lord, because God is all those attributes. In the Nicene Creed we name God, the Holy Spirit, as the Lord, the giver of life. God is not a master who seeks to oppress and dominate. God is the master, the Lord, who has power to protect our souls and who desires that we might have life: rich, deep life that comes from being kind and just and merciful. We praise the Lord who guards the bread of life not by hoarding it only for some but by inviting all to share it in communion. We praise that Lord.

And this word, "praise," what does it mean? The writer of Psalm 148 writes, "Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea-monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and fog, tempestuous wind doing his will." The Hebrew word the psalmist uses for praise is the same word that becomes "Hallelujah!" At first we might imagine the sea-monsters all getting out their hymnals. Is there such a thing as a "fire choir?" Do all the mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars start swaying back and forth in a mighty chorus of Laudate Dominum? Praise is more, of course, than singing hymns. Praise is more than expressing the sentiment "Great job, God!" God does not need an "atta girl or an atta boy" from us. The creatures of God praise God not only by saying how great God is, but by being great just how God made them. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus says, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Those of us who think ourselves wise and intelligent have so often missed the boat. We want to praise by seeming impressive. Does an infant know how to impress anyone? An infant knows how to be hungry. An infant praises the ability of its maker to provide nourishment with a silent gaze of deep contentment at having been fed. If you have ever seen a baby after it nurses and heard its quiet sigh, that is praise. An infant's "hallelujah" is expressed by resting in its mother's arms. The wise and intelligent try to be clever, devising ways to feed themselves. The infant does not know how to sustain itself. It only knows how to BE itself. What Jesus seems to be saying is that God takes great pleasure in revealing life to those who can simply BE creatures of God, willing to receive what God yearns to give. It is not

that wisdom and intelligence are bad. Sometimes, though, our cleverness makes us forget that God has charge over the bread, not us. The one Lord of heaven and earth has bread so amazing and complex that we of such limited wisdom and intelligence can hardly fathom it.

Praise the Lord, brothers and sisters. Begin here, in this place with words and with music, limited though they may be. And then praise the Lord simply by taking a breath. And then praise the Lord by taking one small slow step on the firm earth and feeling the glorious land under your feet. And then praise the Lord by sharing bread with others, a delicious drink of water. Praise the Lord by gazing at a tiny blade of grass, by delighting in how it is illuminated by our brother the sun or, even better, in the light of our sister the moon and the stars. Praise the lord along with sea-creatures and mountains, wild beasts and kings, young and old. Rightly and humbly praise the Lord of heaven and earth. Then, perhaps, we will know our place in the created order and our broken relationship with the other blessed creatures of God. Then, perhaps, we can more deeply confess the wounds we have inflicted on God's world and see the way to healing the earth. Reveal that way to us, O Lord, not because we are wise or intelligent, but because we, like infants, find rest and refreshment in your loving arms. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord.