

Feats of St. Francis  
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The Rev. Denise Trogdon

## A Lone Voice

A few years ago, I had an opportunity to visit the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. The tour began at the entrance of the Lorraine Motel, the site where Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. Looking into the window of a preserved guest room where he met with fellow activists, it's hard to imagine that in such meager surroundings, one could invoke historic change.

Winding through the hallways of an adjacent building, I found myself standing at the window from which the fatal shot rang out, where a prophetic voice was silenced. While the news reels depicted horrific images of discrimination and violence, King's convicting words resounded as a challenge to the people of his time. He offered an invitation to live from a different perspective, one of peace and justice among all God's people. It was a call to transformation. As in other times and generations, his words were met by the prevailing culture with anger and outrage. Change of heart comes sometimes at great cost and often begins with a lone voice.

In the gospel this morning Jesus was that lone voice addressing a culture toiling under the stringent demands of Jewish law. He confronted a people seriously misguided by the notion that wealth, power and piety would bring them closer to God. The rich were considered blessed and the poor lived without hope. Jesus' public prayer shook those in authority and laid claim to the kingdom of heaven for the humble and outcast. "I thank you Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants. For such was your gracious will."

His countercultural message challenged them to see a different perspective: relationship with God was not earned, but a gift. Access to this gift was through participation with Christ. "No one knows the Father except the son and anyone to whom the son chooses to reveal him." Jesus appealed to the multitudes for a change of heart, and issued this invitation: "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest."

We are given this same invitation when we come to the table to receive all that Christ offers. The notion of rest appeals to our weary generation as we run ourselves ragged trying to achieve, to actualize and accumulate. We're not so different from those days of old, trying to do enough, and be enough. His call to discipleship can be saving words if we choose to live them. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden light."

Theologian Paul Tillich suggests that this yoke is not a new demand, but a new reality that gives power for transformation. It's easy because it comes from God and grasps us, not because of what we do but because of who Christ is. When we grow in relationship to Christ, the good flourishes in us. Drawn by God, when we return to God we find peace and rest. When Jesus says, "Learn from me," he is not calling us to mull over theological ideas but to incarnate the virtues exhibited in his life. Living Jesus' imperatives transforms our weary souls to hearts on fire, so that we may bring hope to a hurting world.

Today in our lections and prayers we recognize the life and ministry of St Francis of Assisi, whose life personified this call to discipleship. Having renounced all material possessions as a young man, Francis devoted his life to serving the outcast and caring for the poor. He lived the gospel and honored God in all of creation. Even the name of the order he founded, the Friars minor, reflected his desire to be counted among the least of God's servants. Francis was a lone voice in his community and many thought him mad when he walked away from his inheritance and went to live among the lepers. He was known for his love of all of creation and even the birds would flock to hear his sermons.

It is said that while praying one day in a dilapidated chapel, he heard Christ say "rebuild my church" and he set out straight away to refurbish the chapel. But it was a larger vision that Francis was given and he became a witness to his time through a life of humility, justice and peace. Francis embodied his discipleship by a way of life that empowered him to bring hope to others. His spirit lives on in the order of the Franciscans who live and serve among the people today. One lone voice from meager circumstances began a movement that has changed hearts and lives throughout the world.

How then do we live into Christ's invitation to become disciples? Are we to renounce all possessions and emulate the life of Francis? We may not be called to sainthood, though I admit that I have given a sermon or two for the birds! As Christ's disciples, we are challenged to examine our hearts and explore important questions. How might we live simpler, more gentle and generous lives? Do our priorities reflect God's vision of justice and peace? Can we trust in God's provision and care? Are we willing to be that lone voice?

Over the last several months we have embarked upon a path of inquiry to explore what energizes this community and moves us into deeper discipleship. We have examined how our parish might foster greater commitment to the ways of Christ. Let's face it, Holy Cross has been a busy church but we bear the marks of fatigue. This rest that Christ offers is not inaction, but a call to inhabit the ways of Jesus rather than trying to do the work of ministry by sheer will. We have assurance in our passage today that if we come to Jesus, learn his ways and seek to live them, we will find our hearts renewed. True discipleship fills us as vessels of God's provision and hope. Can you imagine how we might change hearts if we were not a lone voice but a community equipped with God's vision and priorities?

We hear from our culture that the church is in decline. Perhaps we like Francis, are being called to rebuild, not the church, but hearts for Christ. How does a lone parish take on this immense challenge? First, we renew our own commitment to Christ's ways. When we reconnect to that fire that lives in us, we are inspired and equipped to serve with our whole heart. Then we can offer an invitation to others to live a new perspective. Our brothers and sisters before us did this not only with their lips, but in their lives. Discipleship is not without cost. But we can trust in God's promise to carry the burden, to inspire and fill us with peace. We can rest in that. Join us this year in our journey to be disciples that build hearts for Christ. Amen.