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Pentecost, St. Francis Day
Peace, Seattle
October 4, 2009 epk
Matthew 11:25-30

RELINQUISHMENT

We have just entered the autumn season in the northern hemisphere and nature's transition toward winter is now under way.

- The rains have returned.
- Daytime temperatures hover in the 60's while overnight lows find us looking for the flannel sheets.
- And the fringe of color that we started seeing at the tops and outer branches of the maple, alder, and poplar last month is beginning to move in toward the center.

Fall is a favorite season of mine. The colors; the crispness in the air; the golden light of early evening; the great harvest moon; the subtle crunch and earthy aroma of leaves that have let go of their homes in the sky and begun their new project of nourishing the soil.

In autumn the earth teaches us what it means to let go, to relinquish, to shed, to become empty, ready to be filled, a lesson we practice year after year, time and again.
It's a lesson our Lord taught his disciples, and a lesson to which St. Francis gave his life.

There are many reasons to love and admire St. Francis.

- His spontaneous joy in the least little thing;
- His stripping himself naked to renounce material possessions and embrace of "Lady Poverty,"
- his compassionate heart & generosity of spirit,
- his readiness to lead by example,
- his special rapport with animals.

"My sister birds," he once preached to the flocks along the road, "God has given you freedom to wing through the sky…He feeds you and gives you rivers and fountains for your thirst, and mountains and valleys for shelter, and tall trees for your nests. And although you neither know how to spin or weave, God dresses you and your children, for the Creator loves you greatly and He blesses you abundantly. Therefore... always seek to praise God."[1]

It's easy to love St. Francis, but it's also easy to sentimentalize who he was, until you learn of the estrangement he experienced from his family; the exacting discipline that his vows required; the physical toll he sustained from self-imposed poverty; and the burden of responsibility he bore for those who followed him into the holy order he founded.

Francis practiced relinquishment—letting go—on a daily basis. His plea that God would make him an instrument of God's peace endures as one of the great prayers in the tradition of the West. It proclaims the GOSPEL WAY, the upside down-ness of God's framing story, all the while remaining acutely personal—LORD, MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE…

One is never done, never completes the inner work and outer actions implied by this prayer.

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_of_Assisi#cite_note-b78-20

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If I'm to become an instrument of God's peace in my home, I must first let go of MY IDEAS of who my spouse and children should be; if I'm to become an instrument of God's peace in the world, I must first let go of MY AGENDA for how my neighbor, and the world should look and embrace God's instead.

> O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! (Francis once wrote to his brothers)
> O sublime humility!
> O humble sublimity!
> The Lord of the universe,
> God and the Son of God,
> so humbles Himself
> that for our salvation
> He hides Himself
> under an ordinary piece of bread!
> Brothers, look at the humility of God,
> and pour out your hearts before Him!
> Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by Him!
> Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,
> that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally![2]

This is the sacrament of letting go.
Like the sacrament of baptism, this sacrament of letting go is a life-long sacrament.
We're never done with it. And even though it's true that the longer we live the more practice we get, I for one have never found relinquishment to be an easy thing to do.

- We are called to practice this sacrament as we send our children off into the world.
- We are called to practice this sacrament as we begin a new job, as we retire, as we move from a place we've called HOME to some place new.
- We are called to practice this sacrament when, for varying reasons and circumstances, relationships that were once dear to us become broken beyond repair.
- We are called to practice this sacrament when our allotted time on earth, or the time of someone we love, draws to a close.

No we're never done with it, never done with letting go. But neither are we alone.
For every step along the way, with every trembling fear, every ounce of pain and suffering, every gesture of relinquishment, we are companioned by the One who has claimed us in baptism, and whose promises not even death can destroy.

This month, in my Pastor's Pen column, I wrote about my recent trip to Holden Village and the insights of one of the presenters—Dr. Fred Niedner.

Fred reminded us that WILDERNESS is the longest story in scripture, and that much of the Bible's WILDERNESS STORY is a story about RELINQUISHMENT.

From the vantage point of wilderness, surrounded by the unknown, with the future an open question, God's wandering and murmuring people, searching for the SURE THING, find themselves trapped in the past, yearning for what used to be, even though that "used to be" was slavery to Pharaoh.

[2] From ***Francis of Assisi: The Saint***, ed. by Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., et al.

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OH, THE MEALS WE WOULD EAT! they cried to Moses, THE LEEKS, THE ONIONS, THE GARLIC, OH MAN WE HAD IT GOOD THEN! NOW ALL WE'VE GOT IS THIS STINKING MANNA!

Teasing back the layers behind Israel's constant "murmuring" at God and at Moses, Fred taught us that the Hebrew word for **wilderness, *mid-bar,*** comes from the Hebrew word for **"word," *da-bar*.**

To get to "wilderness" you begin with "da-bar" and add to it a preposition that means "away from," "apart from," or "without."

What you end up with, then, is a word for wilderness that translates, **"the place where words don't work anymore," "the place where meaning eludes us," where "we don't *have* the words for what we're experiencing." Wilderness is that place beyond or without words.**

All of us have stood in that wilderness place in our lives, that place where words cease to work; that place where our experience of loss or rejection or violence or betrayal or abandonment leaves us "without words."

In those times we may wonder if we are bearing the weight of God's wrath;
or we may find ourselves looking desperately for someone besides our selves to blame; or we may feel so numb that all the possible explanations or reasons for our experience fall hollow on our ears.

The hard lesson God's people keep on having to learn over and over again is, no one gets out of the wilderness without dying. The life of faith is a long pilgrimage in which we continually let go, more and more, ceding control of our selves, our agendas, our stuff—all we have so carefully gathered and sought to preserve—giving it into the hands of God, until finally we are left in the buff with only a bare-naked trust to hold on to.

The life of St. Francis is instructive for us in this regard. And so, too, the leaves of autumn, for this is the time of year when they give what they have back to the tree, and then let go.

The gesture of thanksgiving you see me make each week during the *Great Thanksgiving* in the Eucharistic liturgy, is a gesture built upon the idea of lifting up what is ours to the heavens.

The subtext of that simple refrain—LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS – WE LIFT THEM TO THE LORD—is that what we have been given we are not meant to hold forever. We must give it up, heave it toward heaven.

Our liturgy teaches us how to do this, week after week. It is a rehearsal for those times when we have no words—and for that final day when the heart within us falls silent.

When that time comes, as it has and as it will, there to greet us is the **Word made flesh**, who offers his life for our sustenance, and shows us, like the leaves, what it means **to give up his life on a tree**.

PRAY: Almighty and All-tender God, whose Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words, you call us to empty ourselves in order to be filled with you; to take up your yoke and leave our own burdens in exchange. Enable us each day, to practice the sacrament of letting go. Enable us, each one, to become instruments of your peace. Through him who is our light and our salvation, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.