



The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi (transferred): October 5, 2014

Matthew 11:25-30

Jesus said, "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; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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 is light."

"Dear God, I cannot love (you) the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all (of) the moon. The crescent is very beautiful and perhaps that is all one like I am should or could see, but what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that I block the whole moon..."

I do not know you, God, because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside."

These are Flannery O'Connor's words from a journal she wrote in 1946 while studying at the Iowa Writers' Workshop—a journal only discovered a year ago. In the journal pages, she, a thoroughly wise, and intelligent young Roman Catholic writer, struggles to surrender all that she is and all that she does to God. What we see in the pages of O'Connor's journal is her astonishingly intimate relationship with God in which she is trying, as she says, to get out of the way of a God who is as beautiful, mysterious and imposing as the large harvest moon in the autumn sky.

As I reread her journal a few weeks ago, what struck me and, in fact, shocked me was the way that O'Connor expresses this. For her, God is everything, and, as she puts it, she as

God's creature, needs to "push herself aside" to make room for God both within her field of vision and within herself.

This notion of more room for God in our lives by our getting out of the way cuts across all my more optimistic views of myself and of humanity, and, truth be told, cuts across my estimation of my own wisdom and intelligence. And so as I read and now hear myself say O'Connor's words, I want to have an argument with her that goes something like this: "Flannery, don't you know that spiritual life is not about getting out of the way or putting ourselves aside? No, instead it's about bringing all of ourselves into cooperation and partnership with God?"

But even as I have this imaginary conversation with an author I admire who is now long dead, I feel the grasp of O'Connor's image upon me: "Dear God, I cannot love (you) the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all (of) the moon...I do not know you, God, because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside."

Today we celebrate another Catholic saint who wrestled with and, you might say, won, a significant battle when it came to getting out of his own way or putting aside his own wisdom and intelligence so that he could look upon the fullness of God's presence. That person, of course, is Francis of Assisi.

Francis started out life with plenty of advantages. The son of a clothier, Francis was a lively, outgoing and gregarious young man who cherished and sought after beauty, poetry and song. Already being schooled in his father's business, he was headed for a life of worldly productivity, comfort and enjoyment. But through a series of experiences over a four-year period, things began to change. Whether he wanted it or not, the crescent moon of God's perceived presence began to grow in his life, filling the sky with its new and imposing size.

First, he joined the army, was captured and spent time as a prisoner of war in difficult conditions. He became seriously ill which left him bedridden and alone for much of the time. He began to have dreams and visions about Jesus. He went on a pilgrimage and actually engaged in an act of "putting himself aside" through taking his own clothes off and exchanging his clothes with a beggar. He had a life-changing encounter with a leper. He heard a voice telling him to rebuild the Church.

One way of thinking about what was happening to him is this: the Francis who had been was decreasing while the presence of God in his life was increasing: becoming larger, more mysterious and more imposing—like a waxing harvest moon on the horizon. Another way of thinking about what was happening is this: all Francis' accumulated wisdom and intelligence was falling away and falling apart. And out of this path of "unknowing" a new being, as spiritually open and as alive as an infant, was being born.

This, then, for me, is the connection between O'Connor's journal entries, Francis' story and our Gospel for today. In that Gospel, Matthew's Jesus thanks God for hiding important things from the wise and the intelligent and revealing them to infants. This is the same struggle O'Connor expresses in her "I need to push myself aside" language and is also the very process that Francis found himself undergoing. For both O'Connor and Francis, the

urge to step aside, to get out of the way or to un-know all previous wisdom and intelligence was a part of the path toward a kind of holy strangeness that both embodied—a holy strangeness that came from seeing themselves as more and more reflecting the light and life of Christ Jesus, a life that expressed the compassion, the justice and the reconciliation of God through the life of one who came to us in the humble form of a servant.

And so this morning, where is God calling you to get out of your own way, and as you do this, to look upon the full light of the presence of God, a presence as mysterious and imposing as a full harvest moon appearing in the autumn evening sky? What of your conventional wisdom or intelligence needs to fall away or fall apart for you to do this? What part of the holy strangeness of Christ Jesus, the strangeness of compassion extended to the untouchable, the strangeness of reconciliation afforded to the undeserving, the strangeness of costly love extended to all? What part of this holy strangeness is meant to be yours?

And here in this community of St. Matthew's I would ask the same questions: Where do you need to get out of your own way, letting go of your wisdom and intelligence so that you can receive a God whose love overcomes all trauma, whose forgiveness outpaces all our notions of who is right and wrong and whose humility and lowliness is the ground of any unity we can ever expect to have with each other. Where is this community called to a kind of holy strangeness that is the spirit of Christ here in this place?

Over the next few weeks as you watch the moon in the night sky grow to a full moon, think on what you may need to un-know, where you may need to step aside from yourself in order to receive the fullness of God in your life. And as you are doing this, watch for the place where you can best reflect the fullness of that light in your own holy and weird little way. For look, the moon is rising and the time is always now.