

Sermon—Proper 22A—2017
Claim the High Calling
Philippians 3:4b-14

Today we recall the ministry of St. Francis as we remember yesterday's blessing of the animals. St. Francis was known to have empathy with animals as well as people from all parts of God's creation. There are legendary stories of St. Francis preaching to the animals as well as accounts of his ministry to people from different religions and cultures. For a 13th century saint who simply wanted to live as Jesus lived on earth, Francis left us with a rich legacy which speaks with prophetic relevance to the complexities of today's life.

In leaving a comfortable life typical of the merchant gentry of his day, Francis lived out the hope that Paul expresses to us in the last two verses of today's Epistle.

“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”
(Philippians 3:13b-14)

Both Paul and Francis left secure earthly careers to press on toward what lies ahead—
“the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

What is this “upward call”? A few verses earlier in today’s Epistle, Paul describes what his “upward call” meant to him in these words.

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

(Philippians 3:7-8)

This “upward call” means knowing Jesus Christ our Lord by walking in intimate fellowship with Him. This sounds good. It is the aim and goal of every Christian to know Jesus as an intimate friend and brother.

The question is, “How do we put flesh on that intention? How does this intimate bond with Jesus play out in real life? How do we claim this “upward call” or in the words of one of my favorite hymns, “Come Labor On”, “Claim the high calling angels cannot share”?

First, we have to recognize that claiming this “upward” or “high calling” means creative tension for each one of us. Both Paul and Francis had to face the creative tension between where they had been and where they were going. Both Paul and Francis had secure niches in life which they had to leave behind to move toward the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Paul could have remained a respected rabbi of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish Supreme Court. Francis could have lived out his life as a wealthy merchant of Assisi. But God had bigger plans for them.

Both Paul and Francis began their responses to this “upward” or “high calling” by living into the tension between where they were and to where they were being called. In dramatic fashion, that tension exploded for Paul as he encountered the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. For Francis, this tension between past and future was dramatized as he shed his rich garments in the town square and walked naked away from his family never to return to them. Yet this was not the end of creative tension for either of them, but the beginning of new dimensions of it.

As they embarked on the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus”, the creative tension in their lives took a new form. Instead of being a tension between their past and futures, it became a conflict between two visions—the vision Paul and Francis had of themselves and the vision God had of them.

When we seriously embark on the Christian journey, that same conflict exists within each one of us as we address these questions. How does God see us versus how do we see ourselves. Who are we in the sight of God?

In the Genesis account of creation, it says that we are made in the image of God. (Genesis 1:26-27) Simply put, when God looks at us, He sees Himself. What God sees are the qualities comprising His spiritual nature—His capacity for empathetic love, creativity, joy, and yes, His sorrow. What is even more remarkable is that God “enfleshed” these spiritual qualities by becoming human Himself in Jesus Christ, proving that these attributes can exist within a human person like ourselves. This “upward call” of God in Christ Jesus is meant to be lived in human flesh like yours and mine!

We're not talking about some ethereal spiritual existence, but living life as we know it today as functioning, breathing human beings.

The creative tension comes for us when we compare how we see ourselves with how God sees us. When we are totally honest, we see ourselves as incomplete—having much unfinished business.

That's the nature of sin—falling short of what we could be. All of us are very aware of this fact in our lives. The longer we walk in the way of Christ, the more sensitive we become to the pervasiveness of our own sin. The tension comes when we are confronted with God seeing His perfection at work in us. Jesus expresses God's vision of us in these words from the Sermon on the Mount. "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."(Matthew 5:48)

This vision goes far beyond moral perfection.

It speaks of our completeness and wholeness—living our lives in harmony and balance—finding congruency between our intention to live God-guided lives and what actually happens to us.

How does God see us in this perfection? God’s vision of us is shaped by the overriding ministry of Jesus, who shed His blood on the cross to cover our sins from God’s sight.

Thus when God looks at us, He sees His image perfectly made human in Jesus. Habakkuk the prophet presents God as one who has purer eyes than to behold evil. God in His heavenly purity cannot not look upon wrong. (Habakkuk 1:13) Yet God confronts our wrongs by becoming one of us and sacrificing Himself to pay the price of our sins. God’s self-offering guarantees His intent of perfection for us.

For us to “claim the high calling” means looking up to the cross as the remedy for the destructiveness of our sins.

The cross of Jesus becomes the means for us to embrace living in God's intended perfection for us. It is the cross of Jesus, not our moral achievements which enable us to embrace the "upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Both Francis and Paul centered their lives on the cross. Francis was so focused on the cross that two years before his death, his body was marked with the stigmata—the marks of Christ's wounds—which became the symbols of Francis' life consecration. The "high calling" to which he had dedicated himself was defined by self-crucifixion. Thus Francis' life was focused on Christ being all in all. In that sense, he sins were covered by the shed blood of Jesus as he journeyed into God's complete, perfect purpose for his life.

When we turn to St. Paul, we see the same pattern.

Paul does not speak of a moral perfection as much as he cites a completion of his own life when he writes these words to the Galatians (2:19-20)

“For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Paul died to the law as the controlling guide of his life by recognizing the truth underlying the law. The law required sacrificial payment for our sins. Paul recognized that he could never make that payment with his own moral achievements. Isaiah (64:6) reminds us that our righteousness is as “filthy rags”. The only alternative left to Paul was accepting an act he couldn’t do for himself.

Only Jesus could do it for him—offer a perfect, unblemished life to fulfill the law’s demand for just payment.

This realization launched Paul toward the goal for the prize of the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”—“the high calling angels cannot share.” He was called to live in Christ as Christ lived in him. Paul moved from glorifying himself to allowing Jesus Christ to express His full self through Paul’s life.

How do you and I come to this sublime state of allowing Jesus Christ to be the total reality of who we are? How do we (in the words of the hymn, *Come Labor On*) “claim the high calling angels cannot share?”

First, be willing to live in creative tension between our past and future selves. We are not frozen in our past assumptions and attitudes. We are in a dynamic state of becoming more what God intends us to be.

Our future destination matters more than our past experiences.

Second, be willing to live in a creative tension between how we see ourselves and how God sees us. God's conception of us is far more profound and far-reaching than we can ever imagine for ourselves.

This twofold creative tension is transforming us from existing in weakness of will and character engendered by our state of sin to living into God's perfection of our body, soul, and spirit. This transformation began long ago at the cross of Jesus and today is flowing through our world today. This transformation brings forgiveness, healing, and perfection to each one of us if only we accept the "high calling" of a daily intimate walk with our Savior Jesus Christ. This walk becomes a marathon which tests every physical and spiritual faculty within us. Yet the prize will be worth the effort of focusing on this high calling.

What is this prize? The last verse of the hymn I've been citing says it best.

“Come labor on. No time for rest till
glows the western sky. Till the long shadows
o'er our pathway lie. And a glad sound
comes with the setting sun, ‘Servants well
done’.”

Let these words from Jesus be our prize
as we press on in response to the “upward
call of God in Christ Jesus.