

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

10.5.25 - The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

I will pull down my barns and build larger ones.

So says the man in Jesus' parable about wealth, about a character we often call "the rich fool." He has more than he needs, so he plans to just build bigger barns for all his stuff.

In the time of Francis of Assisi, something a little similar was happening in religious communities of monks and nuns, self-contained communities with farms, churches, and nice things like artwork and silver. As these communities attracted more people and produced abundantly, they got bigger, they became big castles full of people and stuff. A lot of daily work in the life of a monastery went into simply maintaining and protecting them.

Francis founded a different sort of religious life.

He didn't start out knowing he would do this. The son of a successful Italian silk merchant and French noblewoman, he enjoyed himself in his early years. Then there was this incident with a beggar. A man asked him for help while Francis was out selling his father's cloth in the marketplace. Something about the man tugged at his heart, and at the end of his business deal, Francis called after the man and gave him the entire proceeds, something that no doubt did not please Francis' father!

Then another tug, while Francis was praying in a church near Assisi. He heard the voice of Christ calling to him, "Francis, Francis, go and repair my church." Francis at first thought the voice meant he should literally fix the ruined church he was kneeling in, and he tried to give the priest money.

Over time he would come to realize that repairing the Church was not about buildings, or not only about buildings, but about the whole Body of Christ, all people and even all creatures out in the world.

Francis walked away from his family's wealth and his father's business to start a different sort of holy order, the friars. Friars didn't live in a big castle-like abbey away from the world. They lived in villages and towns and even leper colonies, as Francis and his followers did, living poor like their siblings around them, and ministering to them from up close.

At first afraid of the outcasts living in the leper colony, Francis came to see them as his siblings, he came over time to embrace them. And he didn't stop there. As Francis went deeper into his life of poverty and prayer, deeper into his call, deeper into his relationship with Jesus, he discerned that other living creatures, the animals around him, were also his siblings. He began to see the whole of God's creation, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon, as part of God's family.

This is why we celebrate St Francis by blessing animals, and this is why the title of Pope Francis' document about care for our planet, *Laudato Si*, is taken from St Francis' *Canticle of the Sun*.

St Francis emptied his purse and walked away from his comfortable home. Over his lifetime and ministry he pulled down many of his barns -- the barn keeping him separated from the poor and sick, the barn keeping him inside and away from nature. As he pulled down more and more of his barns, he was building up something new. He was repairing Christ's church to be in proximity with the poor and sick, to be more connected and inclusive, to be less about maintaining itself and more about service.

We too here and now are called to this same kind of work, to resist saving for ourselves, which we are told is wise but which God judges in this parable as the real foolishness. We too are called to pull down our barns, and instead of building bigger ones, to build up Christ's Body in the world.

Now there is a big fight going on in our government right now. A budget is being held up over health insurance costs. Some say we cannot afford those costs, we need to eliminate the systems that created them. Some say we must rather stand with the working class people who need the help, instead of sitting comfortably in our own towers of protection. And while this fight keeps going, some are caught in the middle, TSA employees who must keep working without pay, other government workers who are furloughed, and if this shutdown continues, more and more people who depend on government programs.

We are called to pull down some of our own barns to respond to these times. To pull down our fear, or at least our sense of separateness, from poor people, from frontline workers, from immigrants. To pull down our complacency, our inertia, our fear that there is nothing we can do. To pull down our sense that we cannot do anything different because we, like the rich fool, do not have time or energy for anything else, we must simply keep working to maintain what we have.

We will continue to be called, in these times, to pull down the barns that separate us from the people who completely disagree with us. And these barns have gotten pretty massive at this point, so we may have to settle for trying to get a message through a small crack in the wall of our neighbor's barn. But we are called to try, we need to keep trying.

On this feast of St Francis, we are called to listen to the cry of the beggar and the pain of the leper. We are called to hear the cries of our planet. We are invited to be a little foolish, to give away some of our comfort, to preach to the birds and make a pact with a wolf. On this St Francis Day, St Martin's, let us pray to hear the voice of Christ calling to us. Let us pray to see the barns we have built around us. And let us pray to have the courage to begin to pull them down. Amen.