



I can't; God can; I'll cooperate

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 10-04-20
The Feast of St. Francis; Service of Outdoor Eucharist and Baptism at Beard's Plaisance
The Thirtieth Week of COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States
Matthew 11:25-30*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. **Amen.**

This is the thirtieth week since we have met in person as a St. John's community, and after all this time, even in this cold, I am so glad to see you in person together again. And let's take a moment to pause and remember all those who can't be here physically now. Some of them may be watching this over the Vimeo livestream or on a recording later. In this pause, we are gathered together with you. In Christ, you are here, and we are there.

In our world this week many jarring things have happened. The first Presidential debate occurred. Our President and the First Lady and quite a few others have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. The election is thirty days away and our nation is in great tumult. But today is also the Feast of St. Francis, who is a saint primarily associated with his love of the natural world. Today we will baptize four beautiful little ones, and we will celebrate Holy Eucharist together. And in the middle of all this, I'd like to tell you a story.

I recently watched a Netflix documentary called “My Octopus Teacher,”¹ which is about a man from South Africa named Craig Foster. He was raised on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean, and as a child he often dived in the kelp forests in the sea near his home. During his adulthood he experienced a kind of existential crisis. So he left his job and moved back to the tip of South Africa, and began an extraordinary journey.

Every day, he dived without a wetsuit or scuba gear into the kelp forests off Cape Town, in extremely cold water. He wanted to intimately get to know the kelp forest and all the marine creatures in it, as a part of the environment and not outside it. As a filmmaker he had worked in the Kalahari desert with indigenous people who were the best trackers in the world, and he had been amazed that they seemed an integral part of the natural world, where as he had felt outside of it, and he wanted to experience something like what they did. So he dived in the ocean, and eventually he became aware of an octopus and where her den was. He committed to the discipline of diving to observe her every single day, which he did for many months.

¹ See “My Octopus Teacher,” <https://www.netflix.com/title/81045007>. You can also visit the website of the Sea Change Project, <https://seachangeproject.com/myoctopusteacher/>.

After awhile, the octopus showed curiosity about him too. There are scenes of this octopus cautiously reaching out to touch his face from within her den. Eventually the octopus grew to completely trust him. There are scenes of the octopus swimming to him and literally embracing him. This man watched everything about her daily life, how she hunted and protected herself from sharks. He watched her for the remainder of her life, until she died after hatching her eggs.

The experience of connecting and truly having a relationship with this octopus changed his life. He founded an organization called the Sea Change Project, which is about telling people stories that connect them with the wild, thereby promoting ocean conservation. Because in the end, none of us makes change from hearing about statistics. We are moved by seeing the stories of real people, and real creatures, like this man, Craig Foster, like this octopus. Like the people you know in your life. Like George Floyd.

St. Francis had a similar story of leaving his previous life and embracing the Way of Jesus and the natural world in a radically unencumbered way. He had fought in war and gone on a crusade and gotten really sick. After his recovery he began caring for the poor, and he donated some of his father's money to help them. When his father demanded that he pay back that money, legend says that he took his clothes off to give to his father and renounced all physical property so that he could be radically free.

Since he had nothing to take care of, he fell in love with people and with the natural world and wrote ecstatic songs about “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon.” He experienced himself as part of the natural world, and worshipped the Creator who made us all. He cared for lepers, and animals, and everyone he met.

In both these stories, I see themes that are reflected in the gospel reading for today. Jesus says, “Come to me, you who are weary and heavily burdened, 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.”

Jesus then and now has been inviting us to leave behind the way of life that is not working any more. The way of life that requires too many long hours spent protecting things as they are, and not enough in a generous outpouring of love. To leave behind experiencing ourselves as separate from the natural world, from the red pine trees and the squirrels and the martens and loons, and separate from each other, whether that’s the family member you can’t stand or politicians or Central Americans or Republicans or Democrats. The way of life in which we do not open ourselves to a power greater than ourselves, the power and presence of God. Instead, Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us. In those days, “taking a yoke on” meant becoming the disciple of a rabbi. It meant to observe the rabbi up close, carefully, and to imitate his ways.

There is a particular discipline about taking on a rabbi's yoke; there was discipline about St. Francis' renunciation of physical property; there was discipline about Craig Foster's commitment to dive in the kelp forest every day to delight in and observe the octopus he befriended. But this kind of discipline, even though it is "work" in a sense, has an inherent easefulness and flow in it. It's more about a gentle observation and imitation than gritting our teeth and white knuckling our way through life. The yoke of Jesus is restful because to be a disciple is simply to throw ourselves into the arms of God. To be a disciple is to acknowledge that no matter how hard we try, we still can't accomplish all that we want in the world, and so we need the power of God. It's to do something like what the first three steps of 12 step programs advise, which can be summed up like this: "I can't. God can. I'll cooperate." The yoke of Jesus is restful because we are not holding ourselves separate, but seeking to become less encumbered, more connected, less burdened with that which simply needs to be left behind.

We begin life as a disciple through baptism. In baptism we are initiated into following Jesus' Way of Love through the natural element of water—which symbolizes birth, and cleansing, and life. As we baptize these four little ones this morning and experience the sacrament together, let us again let go of that which is not working any more. We don't have to look very far, these days, to see what is not working.

Let's renounce the root evil which is the belief that we are separate, and that therefore I have the right to take what I need or want without regard to your welfare. Let's instead accept the healing we need from God. Let's walk through the world with less armor, less baggage, all the things that come with seeing ourselves as isolated and separated and needing so much protection, and take the risk to observe other living things with delight and curiosity and the deep gentleness and respect Jesus talks about. Let's be more like Craig Foster swimming in cold water so he could experience himself as a part of the kelp forest and not outside of it. Let's be more like St. Francis who gave up all his baggage, quite literally, so join God in radical freedom to bring restoration to this world. Then we can cultivate relationships across lines of difference. Then we can be healed of our own traumas and become gentle enough to dismantle systems that keep traumatizing generations of people who deserve better. Then can we experience ourselves as part of this beautiful natural order that includes the boundary waters and Lake Superior and the prairies, and live in a way that has a much gentler impact on the life all around us.

Let me ask you two questions: what in your life is not working, that you need to leave behind? And, who are the creatures or people God is asking you to become less protected against, and more curious about, with love and gentleness and respect?

Let's try walking through the world with more gentleness and less baggage, with a willingness simply to observe those around us with curiosity and love. Observe a child playing. Observe a squirrel burying nuts and fake burying nuts in one spot to trick the other squirrels. Listen to the wind in aspen trees that sounds almost exactly like water in a creek. Go walk with Doug Mensing at 10:30 to observe birds in the sanctuary north of Lake Harriet. Observe these beautiful little ones who are about to receive the sacrament of new birth, the initiation into the Way of Jesus, which is a life unencumbered by anything but light, anything but love. May we let go of that which is not working, and may we embrace the gentle discipline of the Way of Love, and participate with God to make a new world. May it be so. Amen.