

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Dr. Stephen Farris
Aug 5, 2018 – Lake Joseph Community Church
“What I Have I Give You”

What comes next for the disciples? Well, for the disciples, there was an appearance of the Risen One. He showed the marks. He even ate some fish as evidence that he is not a ghost. The Risen Lord explained to them the Scripture, just as he had to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Perhaps, even more significantly, he told them there would be a time of waiting until they would be equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit. For he said, “You will be my witnesses”. What may be more important still, however, that this time, the disciples are together, not isolated individuals here and there. Christ has appeared to the church and made the church, not individuals, his witnesses.

So, what comes next for us? Easter is over, Christ is risen, the last echoes of Jesus Christ is risen today have faded away and ... Perhaps once again, there is a time for waiting, asking, praying for the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, it is time to study the Scripture and to look for the presence of Christ in them. And it is time to bear witness.

This takes us to a time when the disciples do just that, namely, to bear witness and to do so as a church.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us”. And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

Now, it is easy enough to reply, “What do I have to give? How can I bear witness? I haven't had a vision of the Risen Christ. And for sure, I can't heal anyone!” Reasonable objections! What I have, I give to you. Which is better, money or healing? Or, to put it in more general terms, “Which is better, to concentrate on what we do not have, or what we do have? What I have, I give. So, what do I have to give? And, once again, to think about witnessing as a church.

One thing I have is a memory of hearing this passage read in unusual circumstances.

Some year ago, Patty and I spent two springtime weeks in Tuscany, Italy, renting with old friends a flat in a farmhouse set amidst vineyards. Every day we would drive out to visit the churches, museums, galleries and ancient towns of the region. To my surprise, even in those two weeks, between my knowledge of French and remnants of my Latin, I was able to read considerable written Italian texts such as may be found on historical plaques or in guidebooks. I was even able on occasion to take in some spoken Italian. It ought to have been, and in many ways actually was, a glorious experience. It was marred for me, however by the uncomfortable truth that I had entered a period of spiritual dryness. I

do not want to overstate this. I am not talking about the dark night of the soul or a spiritual dryness of Sahara Desert proportions, just a prolonged drought. It was real enough, however, and serious enough that I found it hard to pray.

I think it was hard for me to pray because day after day I was seeing and felt obligated to admire, masterworks of art that represented things which I as a Protestant did not believe. I began to feel, for example, that if I were faced with even one more representation of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary I would burst. And it didn't matter if the painting was by Michelangelo or some other master, enough was enough! It is always, I think, a mistake to concentrate on what we cannot believe rather than on what we do believe.

So matters continued until very near the end of our stay. That day we decided to drive to the neighboring province of Umbria to visit Assisi, the home of St. Francis, a figure whom I did admire. After driving for two hours, I remember well crossing a fertile valley and catching sight of Assisi, almost glowing a delicate pink in the morning sun, there on a mountain side above the farms below. The guidebook insisted that visitors who were interested in Francis – and most visitors to Assisi are – should most certainly make an extended stop at the church of Saint Mary of the Angels which was located on the flat land at the foot of the mountainside on which the old city of Assisi was located. The guidebook was confusing, however. It seemed to speak on the one hand of a chapel in which Francis and his brothers had prayed and the cell where the saint had endured his final illness. On the other hand, the book described a church commenced in 1569 with money supplied by King Philip II of Spain. This church, the book claimed, was the seventh largest church in Christendom. The description seemed to make no sense.

It was easy to find the church as we drove into town for it was as large as the guidebook had promised. But it was rather ugly, in my view, far too large and ornate for the simple and austere life of Francis, and built in an architectural style I have never been able to admire. That, however, was not the most troubling side of the matter. Rather, it was the business of money for construction given by the King of Spain in 1569. I guessed, with some confidence, that the wealth behind the gift was wrung from the suffering natives of Mexico, Peru and other Spanish colonies of the New World. That was surely one of the most shameful episodes in the long history of the church. Nor is this merely a matter of imposing contemporary judgements upon a church of other times. Another admirable figure Brother Bartolome de las Casas, excoriated at the time the cruelty of Spanish policies towards the indigenous people of the New World in *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.¹ I could not have had a more negative attitude as I entered the church.

At least, I was negative until, at the crossing of nave and transepts, dwarfed by the scale of the later church, I saw the Porziuncola, the tiny and roughly built 9th century chapel where Francis had prayed. On the side was the rough cell where Francis had dwelled in his last years. As his death approached, he asked his brothers to lay him on the bare earth beside the cell so that he could die in utter poverty in full

¹ Bartolome de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* London: Penguin Classics, 1999.

solidarity with his Master who had, as he himself said, no place to lay his head. I took my seat in the nave and listened as a Franciscan read aloud a Scripture lesson for the day in Italian, as one might expect. Through the church his voice rang on the ears of visitors from around the world, some pilgrims, some, like me, tourists' ticking off an entry in a guidebook. In a moment of Pentecost-like clarity, I could suddenly understand what I was hearing. "Silver and gold, have I none, but what I have I give you." What a reading for St. Francis! And for me.

It was possible to enter the Porziuncola for a few moments. When it was my turn, I took my place near the rear of its simple nave at one of the unadorned kneelers. And I could pray.

I think I came very near that day to what might be called a stereotypically Protestant error or perhaps more accurately described, a Protestant over-simplification. I came very near to holding in utter contrast the outer and the inner church, the proud and sinful church as an institution, on the one hand, and the simple, pure gospel within, the gospel of Francis himself. But I looked around me at the rough and simple construction of this little chapel which represented that gospel in my eyes. I realized that, if left to the elements, it would likely have fallen apart many centuries ago. Rather, it had been preserved by that grandiose surrounding structure that I had been so ready to hold in scorn.

The gospel does not exist on its own. It does not float, disembodied between heaven and earth. It is sheltered within the church, with all its many faults. Now, the history is still shameful. We can and must do better to purify the church so it can be a more fitting means for God's good ends. But it remains a place where the gospel, often when we least expect it, may be found.

And it is ordinary people like ourselves who bear witness, ... with what we have.

It is recorded that Francis beheld the risen Christ in his initial vision and that one said to him, "Francis, Francis, go and repair My House which, as you can see, is falling into ruins." Perhaps, in our time, that is part of our task also.

There is a story about Mother Teresa. When she went to Sweden to receive her Nobel Prize, a "smart" young reporter mocked her, comparing the extent of the problems in India with the limited help she could give, helping the poor to die in peace. The saint lost her temper --- saints do have tempers --- and said, "Young man, I do what I can, where I am, with what I have." What I can, where I am, with what I have ...

What I have

You will have to decide what you have ...

And Peter said, What I have, I give unto you. That is "witness."