

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

When Little Seeds Grow

2 Timothy 1.1-14

October 2, 2022

Seven hundred ninety-six years ago this week, St. Francis died near his hometown of Assisi, Italy. Surrounded by his friends and surely innumerable angels, Francis breathed his last. He was 44 years old. In his short life, Francis changed the church. As a young man, he heard God say, "Francis, rebuild my church," and he did, first with brick and mortar, repairing the crumbling walls of a small chapel outside the town, then leading a growing group of men and women with his simple love for Jesus and his belief that everything is sacred. Francis, it is said, may have lived a life most resembling Jesus of anyone before or since. Francis, it is said, changed the church in all the world.

He wasn't a bigger-than-life personality; he didn't try to achieve fame and glory; he didn't try to be big. In every way, he tried to be small, trivial, even insignificant. He gave away his money; he turned away from the industry that he could have inherited; he pushed attention to others; when men and women came to follow him, he welcomed them, but their devotion he never wanted; he wanted them to learn to love God fully and faithfully. He didn't want to become big in their eyes; he wanted Jesus to be big in their eyes and in their hearts. He didn't want a movement that would be about him and what he could accomplish, even though they came to be known as the "Franciscans." He saw himself and all those who followed him as small in the big world. They called themselves not brothers, but *fratelli*, little brothers, friars minor.

God can do big things with small things. "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed," Jesus told his disciples, "you can say to a mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and throw yourself in the sea and it would obey you.'" I'm not sure that you should uproot a mulberry tree and throw it in the sea, but Jesus can use all kinds of illustrations to make serious points. God uses small things, like mustard seed-sized faith, for big purposes.

God can do big things with faith, even small faith and courage and love and trust the size of a mustard seed, which was one of the smallest seeds they knew, which in turn produced wildly large plants. Jesus refers to mustard seeds and mustard plants several times. What he saw there, from seed to plant was a sign of all that God can do with a little faith and divine grace. This is a picture of Jesus, his own life who, compared to the power of Rome, was nothing more than a little seed. But from that seed, the kingdom of God grew abundantly and wildly throughout the whole empire and the whole world. God grows a forest from the small seeds of faith.

I imagine Francis loved those parables of seeds and plants, trees, and critters. He was known for his expansive generous spirituality in which his devotion to Christ was refracted into everyone and every experience he had. Christ was always right before his eyes, whether through an icon or the eucharist or an impoverished person or a mountain or a forest or a garden. The eyes and heart of a spirit like his are wide open to God's grace in everything and every way. Years ago, DaySpring honored this spirit and recognized the ways that we encounter it when we started naming the old oak in the field, as the St. Francis Tree, which has grown into something like the icon of this church campus. The Francis Tree.

The seed planted with the naming of the tree has grown in our eyes. And so, a year ago we began with a small seed of the idea to see what was possible on these church grounds by the time we celebrate the 800th anniversary of Francis's death in 2026. That gave us five years. This is the end of year one, the beginning of year 2. Where are we now? I'd like to offer some reflection on that today as a way of celebrating the last year and looking ahead to the next four. Rather than make this like a report, I'd like to make it a prayer, and so I need your help. I want to invite you to join me each time by saying, "Thanks be to God."

So, for example, I'll say something like . . .for the trees in our view all around us here that know how to stay alive and keep growing even in the face of this months-long drought, we say . . .**thanks be to God**. For the big, beautiful pecan in the field who welcomed us to this place every Sunday but whose life was taken in one strong gust of wind a month ago, and for all the ways now its cut limbs may bring warmth to campfires, seasoning to barbeques, and new life wherever they go, we say . . .**thanks be to God**.

For trails in the woods, we say . . . **thanks be to God**. Walking trails have meandered back through the woods behind the sanctuary for a long time. In this last year, two main trails have been connected through chainsaw work and creative bushwhacking. Now the trails make a whole circle that can be followed. People all throughout the week walk the trails for fun with kids or a quiet respite from city noise, or for prayer. Caring for the oaks and pecans and cedar elms, while trying to cut out the invasives and creating peaceful places to walk. This is good.

For Brother sun and sister wind, we say . . . **thanks be to God**. Francis' famous canticle of creation called on all the creatures to praise God, invoking a kinship relationship with the sun and earth, sea and wind. He called them Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Sister Water, Brother Fire. He saw the world this way, as a family of creation. God's family. This year, we switched our electric provider so that now 100% of electricity at DaySpring is renewable, a gift of Sister Wind and Brother Sun. So, when you feel the air conditioning, or turn on lights or use hot water, say a word of thanks for your sister and your brother whose energy, along with the ingenuity of human creativity, makes it possible. This is good.

For the Waco Tribune-Herald, which two weeks ago was published with a full-color front page photo of yours truly, your pastor on the front page sitting in a parked Ford Mustang Electric Vehicle, looking like I'd just seen Santa Claus. I'm not sure this is thanks be to God, but it's pretty funny. I didn't even get to turn the car on, much less drive it around the parking lot where it was being demonstrated. At the moment of the photo, I was hunting for the button to open the sunroof, a button I never found. And then at the end of the day, I drove off in my gas-fueled pickup truck. So, here is it . . . for changes just beginning and all that is stirring in us as we delight in the journey to align our love of God with the practicalities of our lives . . . we say, **thanks be to God**.

For vegetables in our gardens, on our shared community table, in our bellies, and in our compost, we say . . . **thanks be to God**. Until the drought knocked us out, this year we had a modest little garden. Some of you had nice gardens. We started a practice on Sunday mornings of sharing produce from these gardens on Sunday mornings, giving what we can and taking what we like. We had a communion table and a community table. As fall gardens begin now, I look forward to all these gardens again producing enough to share in the form of lettuce, chard, onions, and even eggs from your chickens. A communion table and a community table. This is good. Our community compost site completes its first full year as well. Compost is a living redemption parable as slimy scraps, in what still seems like a miracle to me, become nutrient-rich soil. This year, we entered our community compost project into a national contest for ecological uses of church grounds, and we lost. They say, we didn't actually lose, there are no losers here. We just didn't actually win. Sure. That's true. But it's a lot more fun to win. Maybe next time. This is good.

For the communion table, we say . . . **thanks be to God**. Thanksgiving in Bible language is the word *eucharist*. The word for church fellowship is *communion*. We meet there for Communion, for the Lord's Supper. By whatever name, in this last year, the Table has become even more central to the worshipping life of the church in a post-Covid era. Sometimes DaySpringers make the bread, like this morning. No one yet has made the wine, but applications are open. "Taste and see the Lord is good," the psalmist invites. Yes, we taste and are given eyes to see the goodness of the Lord in the gift of bread and wine, of grain and grape, and in our brothers and sisters with whom we share this gift of grace. This is good. In the invitation Christ gives to us to come to the table, in the gospel in the shape of a meal given, received, and shared, in prayers and blessings, and a community at communion, we are so richly blessed.

For our building committee whose work is starting to get serious and real, we say . . . **thanks be to God**. In year one of this five-year journey, the congregation approved moving forward into the design process. The committee interviewed and selected an architect from Austin, and began meeting with his team. Next week at our Covenant Day retreat we'll have a little to share with you. At the Quarterly Meeting on October 30, we have a lot to share. That's a big one and exciting. Write that one down for that night. This will all be prominent as we move into year 2.

And finally, back to trees. For live oak trees, on this campus and in this city, we say . . . **thanks be to God**. I could talk here about the cathedral of oaks which nurtured us through the pandemic season and to which we return from time to time for worship. I could talk about the beautiful trees around Cameron Park, or I could talk about

live oaks in general. But I want to focus on two old live oak trees. I've already mentioned one. The Francis tree whose arms have offered shade for personal devotions and deep conversations, for Easter Sunrise services, and I'm sure more than one afternoon nap. (Don't ask me how I'm sure.)

The other tree is in north Waco, on the back corner of a big lot on 15th street. Before this year, the tree was swamped by undergrowth. She was there, but hidden and almost choked out. But she wanted to live. She's old and wise and has been through many storms. Over many weekends this year, many of you chopped and dug and chipped and raked until the dappled sunlight reached through her branches and touched the soil around her feet again. She needed your care, and you gave it to her.

She is on the back corner of the Naomi House property. The residents of the house have named her the St. Clare Tree. And so she is, named after Francis's close companion. The town of Assisi is anchored by two grand cathedrals which honor Francis and Clare. On one end of town is the Basilica di San Francesco, where St. Francis is buried. At the other end of town is Basilica di Santa Chiara where St. Clare is buried. Clare was Francis's close friend and first female follower. She was a fierce and devoted lover of God and leader of people. There's a story told around Assisi that one night the residents looked out across the valley and saw what looked like a fire raging out of control. They raced down the mountain to extinguish the flames but found once they got there it wasn't a fire. They found Francis and Clare praying together enveloped by a holy light all around them which lit up the night sky. In Francis's dying moments he asked to be taken to the window of Clare's room in the church Francis rebuilt, where she could pray over him.

When you make pilgrimage to Assisi, you see that the town is anchored on an axis between these two great cathedrals, about a 15-minute walk between them. I've made that walk with many of you on a Sunday morning. When you're in Assisi, you are embraced in the arms of these two saints, St. Francis and St. Clare. Now, I say to you we are, too. There is an axis running through Waco from the St. Clare tree at the Naomi House to the St. Francis tree at DaySpring, about a 15-minute drive between them. We are held now in their embrace and in their holy friendship.

Yet, there is something even more beyond warm embrace and friendship when you are between the arms of the sacred fire of this friendship. The Spirit of God is there, and so is courage and redemption. The residents of Assisi in the 2nd World War, lived then as they do now, as they have for hundreds of years, with their lives held in the embrace by Francis and Clare, and their love for Jesus in all things and in all people. When the war came to their country, and Jews from all over Europe and all over Italy were being deported to concentration camps, the people of Assisi knew what to do and didn't have to ask about it in defiance of their government. Assisi became known in the backchannels and whispers of central Italy as the place for Jews to go for safety from the holocaust. Jews started slipping in the city at night, rabbis with their menorahs and torahs, pregnant mothers with soon to be born babies. The people of Assisi, the mayor, the bishop, the priests, the nuns in the convents, the printing press workers, farmers in the fields... they received these people fleeing for safety into their homes and into their lives. The bishop took a sledge and knocked a hole in his bedroom wall to form a cavity to hide the rabbi's menorah from snooping eyeballs. Babies were born behind the sequestered walls of the convents. When heavily armed German soldiers banged on the convent doors hunting Jews, the little nuns met them there, scolded them, and told them to get lost. And they did. You don't mess with German nuns.

Here, there are more than a few central Texas Baptists who have the same grit, the same spirit, the same calling, who put their minds and hearts together this year to welcome friends who need a safe home. And they found the arms of Clare ready to receive them.

Today, Assisi welcomes you with a sign that reads, "*Benvenuto a Assisi, citta della pace.*" "Welcome to Assisi, city of peace." It is a hard-won peace, a testing of those who had a little faith, and a holy calling. You can feel it in the narrow streets, you can feel it in the churches. You can feel it in the stories that are still being told 796 years after Francis's death.

I have to think we, too—with trails and trees, sun and wind, community and communion, are embraced today from the heart of the city to the heart of this church campus, by two strong oaks, Brother Francis Tree, Sister Clare Tree. In their arms, we can only wonder what all can grow from small seeds.

And this was just year one. For all that was, and is, and is yet to be, we say . . . **thanks be to God.**

Brothers and sisters, wrapped in the arms of God, let us prepare our hearts to come to the table of our Lord.

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