

Founders' Day
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2015
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

Sanctuary

It has been an amazing five days since Pope Francis first arrived here in Washington, DC last Tuesday. Of course, his visit has dominated the news – on TV, in the newspapers, on-line. What a refreshing break from the news we've heard and seen recently. The crowds, even just to see the Pope drive by, have been incredible. His visits to some of the most iconic places in our nation – the White House, the Capitol, Ground Zero in New York City, and Independence Hall in Philadelphia – have been inspiring and filled with emotion.

Francis seems to bring God's dazzling light into our cultural darkness. His warm pastoral touch shines through the murkiness of our anxiety about the economy, the state of the world, and the political circus preceding our next Presidential election just about 13 months away.

So what is this all about? I think Pope Francis has brought hope to all of us. He connects us to the reality of God's love, God's kingdom. Francis tells us, shows us that compassion, mercy, justice and peace can be realities here and now. His title "pontiff" comes from the Latin word meaning "bridge." Francis is a bridge connecting us to the power and presence of God's love. He shows us that the Church can be a sanctuary, a place set apart, a people with a special call to provide a sacred place for healing. One commentator writes, "Francis' words are used to uplift rather than to wound..."¹

We all need this connection to God. We all need places, people who can connect us to the reality of God's love. This is the story of the Bible. This is the story of Jesus. This is the story of the Church. We are here today because we need to be connected. We need community.

So, as we celebrate the anniversary of our founding as a parish church 160 years ago, we celebrate the ways so many for so long have found their connection to God through this place – through the physical space, the sanctuary, that is Grace Church and through the people, the community this has been, is, and will be Grace Church.

We have two important biblical narratives to consider as we reflect upon our anniversary and our connection with God. In the 28th chapter of Genesis, we meet Jacob fleeing from his brother, Esau, and having a very dramatic dream at Bethel. Jacob's story to this point is one of deception and conflict. He has cheated his brother, Esau, out of his birthright. He has tricked his father, Isaac. Jacob is in his own personal darkness. He has little hope, little sense of God in his life.

But God reconnects with Jacob on this night through a dream, a vision of earth and heaven connected by a great ladder with angels and God's voice repeating again the promise to Jacob. "*Your descendents shall be like the dust of the earth...I am with you and will bring you back to*

¹ Timothy Egan, *N.Y. Times*, 9/25/15

this land...” (28:14, 15) When Jacob awoke, he proclaimed, “*How awesome is this place...surely the Lord is in this place...this is the house of God...the gate of heaven...*” The place’s name became Bethel, “*the house of God.*” For centuries, Bethel was the most important sacred place, sanctuary for the northern territory of Israel, surpassed in holiness only by Jerusalem in the south. Jacob’s relationship with God was reestablished and his hope was restored.

On the last night of Jesus’ life, after the Last Supper, after the washing of feet, after trying to reassure his disciples that God would not abandon them, even after Jesus’ arrest and death, Jesus prays for his disciples. Chapter 17 of John’s Gospel is an account of this prayer. Jesus prays for his disciples to stay connected to God and to one another. He prays for his disciples to carry on his work in the world. John uses the word “world” eight times in these ten verses to stress the mission of the Church to the world.

The community of the faithful will provide sanctuary for the world’s healing, for the world’s peace. So Jesus in his prayer defines the mission of the Church for all time, “*that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.*” (17:23)

This has been our mission at Grace Church – to connect the world to God’s love; to carry on the work of Jesus; to bring healing and hope, day by day, Sunday by Sunday, year after year, for these 160 years. Grace Church, the people and the place, is a sanctuary where all can find God’s love, God’s hope.

We have been sent to the world to proclaim this message of God’s love, God’s hope. It is the message Pope Francis shares. It is the message our parish has shared. It is the message we share in our own day.

Genesis 28:10-17
Psalm 84:1-6
1 Peter 2:1-5, 9-10
John 17:6a, 15-23