

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL KOTTKE  
UNIVERSITY PARK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**Sunday, June 22, 2008**

**Title: Reflections on Poetry: The Poetry of St. Francis of Assisi**

**Scripture:** Psalm 48

**Theme:** Poetry is a language that reflects the Sacred. This is the poetry of a Muslim woman mystic who lived in the 8th century in what is now known as Iraq.

**Poems:** “Because He Gave Birth,” “When I Returned from Rome,” and “In All Things”

As United Methodists, we place great value on an analytical understanding of our faith. We urge a belief system that has undergone the test of critical thought. The four components of our quadrilateral reflect the importance of a reasoned faith: Scripture, Tradition, Personal Experience, and Reason. But it is not our only value. We do well to open ourselves to a personal experience of faith that comes from a different direction. Poetry does this for us.

The invitation of this sermon series on poetry is just that: to open yourself to the images evoked by these poems. Don't try to analyze them. Rather, simply let them come to you. If one poem does not evoke a meaningful response than let it go. If you find yourself moved by one of the images of a poem than stay with that image. Move with it. Embrace it. Write down your thoughts and feelings. Perhaps the images evoked are speaking to you in uniquely important ways.

Last week, I reflected on a Muslim woman's poetry from the 9th Century, Rabia of Basra. This morning, I lift up three poems of a very familiar Christian writer, Francis of Assisi. I am drawing these poems from *Love Poems from God, Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West* by Daniel Ladinsky [Penguin Compass].

Francis was born in 1182 in Assisi of central Italy into the family of a wealthy textile

merchant. In his youth, Francis enjoyed the wealth of his father and had the reputation of being a “partier.” As a young man, he embraced the noble image of serving as a knight. In his very first military fight, he was captured and held in prison for a year. He returned home very ill. When he recovered, he was determined to enter into the military again, this time in one of the Crusades. This took him to the Middle East where it is believed that he came into contact with some of the spiritual writings of Islam. During this time, he also had numerous visions. He came to realize that military service was not for him. He returned to Assisi and began his life dedicated to the helping the impoverished. In direct opposition to the established theologies of his day, he believed that life as we live it could find joy and happiness.

There is a wonderful story told of Francis. It is said that one day while Francis was still trying to find his purpose in life, he was riding on a beautiful white horse on a road leading away from Assisi. Upon the road in the distance was a dark figure walking towards him. Without even being able to see the figure clearly, Francis was immediately engulfed in fear and foreboding. Still his horse continued towards this figure and the figure continued towards Francis. At a near distance, he could tell that the figure was indeed a cloaked leper walking towards him. Though still at a distance, it was as if their eyes became locked on one another.

When no more than a few dozen feet from each other, they stopped. Not a word. Not a movement. Frozen in time. Eyes continued locked on each other. Francis felt himself consumed and paralyzed with fear and repulsion. Then something happened. He found himself getting off his horse. He took off his expensive cloak. Giving the man his cloak, in turn he took the cloak of the leper. He then embraced the leper with a kiss and continued walking into the distance with the leper and his horse at his back. It is said that when he had walked a hundred feet or more, he turned and looked from whence he had come. He saw neither the leper or his horse. It is written that at that moment he experienced the baptism of joy and his triumph over fear.

In the words of Diana Butler Bass who spoke to us during this Annual Conference just completed - this story is so beautiful that it must be true, whether or not it happened.

The first poem is entitled “Because He Gave Birth”:

*So precious is a person's faith in God, so precious;  
Never should we harm that.  
Because He gave birth to all religions!*

If indeed, we believe in a God who has given birth to the beauty of creation, a God who has reconciled us out of love [not judgment, not because we have earned it], then who are we to declare that God's love is not a part of another's life simply because they do not use the words that we use as Christians? In God's words of the baptism of Jesus, words of covenant, “Blessed are you, my beloved, in you I am well pleased.” There are many ways in which God baptizes with the covenant of love.

So precious is a person's faith in God, so precious; never should we harm that.

Second poem is “When I Returned from Rome”:

*A bird took flight. And a flower in a field  
whistled at me as I passed.  
I drank from a stream of clear water. And  
at night the sky untied her hair  
And I fell asleep clutching a tress of God's.*

*When I returned from Rome, all said, “Tell  
us the great news,”  
And with excitement I did: “A flower in the  
field whistled, and at night  
The sky untied her hair and I fell asleep  
clutching a sacred tress...”*

In 1209, Francis journeyed to Rome to seek an audience with Pope Innocent III to seek permission for the founding of a new religious order. A journey to Rome was an immensely important event. It was a pilgrimage of faith. And more importantly, an audience with the Pope could either result in a blessing or judgment. There was no assurance ahead of his trip that he would receive a blessing.

“When I returned from Rome, all said, ‘Tell us the news.’” Of course, they would. So much depended on the status and power of the Pope. Yet, Francis never lost his perspective of where the real status and power resided. This poem reflects the essence of Francis' understanding of his position within the principalities and powers of the world.

“With excitement I did [tell the great news of the trip and its success]: A flower in the field whistled and...the sky untied her hair.”

It is so easy for us to lose our perspective of priorities. How is it that you keep God first and foremost in your life? In what ways are you vulnerable to the seductions of the ego, of status, and the illusion of power?

The last poem is “In All Things”:

*It was easy to love God in all that was  
beautiful.  
The lessons of deeper knowledge, though,  
instructed me  
To embrace God in all things.*

Here in Colorado, who of us has not been deeply moved by some experience with the beauty of our mountains? It is easy to believe in God and God’s love in the presence of that which is beautiful. But the invitation of our faith is to find God even in that which is not beautiful, to find God even through that which is known as pain, as fear, as even death.

Last week I read from a poem of Rabia which said, “Die before you die.” How harsh that sounds and yet its spiritual truth is solid. We cannot know God fully until we face our deepest fears. If we do not own our fears as something within us then we project our fears onto others and that is the most destructive action that we can engage in. We have been living under a culture of fear these last many years. It has controlled our lives and it has been eroding our souls.

When Francis embraced the leper, he knew a baptism of joy and a freedom from fear. To what is God calling you to embrace, that you might be freed from your deepest fear?

To embrace God in all things, this is the wisdom of our faith.