

“Step by Step”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Church – Toano, VA
Feast of St. Francis, September 27, 2009
James 5:13-20

James writes, “Are any among you cheerful? Then you should sing songs of praise.” Is anyone here cheerful? We certainly have a right to be. We’ve had a glorious weekend, haven’t we, even with the threat of rain. Unlike the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, we’ve had plenty of meat. Heaps of barbecue and Brunswick stew and hot dogs and sausage from the Fall Festival. We haven’t had to worry about eating bland manna. We’ve had well-seasoned chili and tasty treats from our Amazin’ Grazin’ bakers. Yesterday was truly a day for feasting! That alone is a reason to be cheerful and to sing songs of praise.

And it wasn’t just a feast of food. It was also a feast of community. What a joyful thing to see so many people here at our church. They came to be fed, but they also came to give. It seems to me that that’s what church should be about – giving and receiving. People come here to be fed by our hospitality and compassion, by our good food and our friendliness, and by our fun and fellowship, but more than that they come here and are fed by God. In turn, they give out of their abundance by purchasing raffle tickets or buying food, by bidding on a silent auction item or purchasing an attic treasure, or by signing up to volunteer with some of the community organizations we support. This is a sacred place, a place where we receive abundantly from our gracious God, and then we share our abundance with others. Are any among us here cheerful? Then let us sing songs of praise!

Of course some of us might not be cheerful this morning. Some of us might be dealing with health issues of our own or of a loved one. Some of us may be dealing with the pain of a broken relationship with a spouse, child, parent, or friend. Many of us are dealing with economy related issues. Our country is divided into factions that can't even speak civilly to each other, much less work together to solve problems. Parts of our country are dealing with terrible natural disasters like the flooding in Georgia or the fires in California. And then there's the poverty and disease and oppression in other parts of the world. We heard heart-breaking stories last week from the Rev. Richard Kunz about life in Honduras. It can be easy when faced with all of our own problems and all of the world's problems to give in to despair or to give in to a general apathy that says, "I can't do anything to change these things, so why bother?"

That's why a day like yesterday is so important. It's a day of hope that stands up against the powers of this world that tell us that there is no hope. It's a day of our Hickory Neck community coming together after months of planning and labor to provide a fun and festive event for our larger community. It's a day to raise money and awareness for the organizations that are helping those in need in our community – and they are making a difference. It's a day when we *are* that beacon on the hill that we discussed so much in our visioning process. It's a day that reminds us that even in the midst of economic woes and health problems, in the midst of contentious politics and environmental crises, in the midst of all of our suffering in various ways, we are blessed. We are the children of a gracious and loving God who sees us and knows that we are good. We may be living in difficult times, but we are resurrection people, and we know that there is hope.

Will Hickory Neck's Fall Festival save the world from its problems? No. It won't even save the Williamsburg area from its problems. But we are doing our small part. The powers of this world would have us believe that if we can't solve the whole problem, then we shouldn't even bother with a small piece of it. But there's a song that I love that says something different. You may know it. The lyrics go like this:

Step by step the longest march can be won, can be won
Many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none
And by union what we will can be accomplished still
Drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none.

Step by step. That's what St. Francis did. He wasn't trying out for sainthood like you would try out to be on American Idol. It's only over the course of centuries that people have come to revere him as a saint because of the things he did in his life to serve God and others. It's easy to look at the saints and be daunted by the example they set. But St. Francis didn't think of himself as a saint. He thought of himself as following God's will for him. He cared for the people he encountered in his life. He took care of lepers and those poorer than him. He took care of the small creatures he encountered. He knew himself to be loved of God and he shared that love with others. He was doing his part, adding his step to the march, his stone to the arch. Step by step.

That's a calling we can share with Francis. We here at Hickory Neck can't solve the world's problems, and it is unlikely that we will be the kind of saints that Francis was. But yesterday we showed what we *can* do. No single person could accomplish alone what we did yesterday by working together. We added our step to the march, our water to the mill. Moses couldn't do it alone; God gave him helpers. The same is true for us. God gives us what we need to do what we can. Step by step.

It takes very small steps.

Pray a prayer,

sing a song,

give a gift,

take a hand,

welcome a stranger,

break bread together.

Be the people of God that you already are.