

*Welcome to this Website!*



We hope you will find something of what you may be looking for in a welcoming congregation trying to seek and serve Christ in all we do, with God's help. What follows is an abridged version of a sermon that was preached to the people of St. Francis on September 13, 2009. We invite you not only to "listen in" but hope that you might come to join us—first as our guest, but perhaps eventually as fellow hosts who share this ministry with us.

Faithfully,  
Rich Simpson, Rector

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*If you are new to St. Francis you should know something from the start: the strength of this congregation is not about the charisma and dynamism of its clergy. (Lord, have mercy!) It's about God at work in this place and beyond these walls through the work we are called to share in Christ's name, as members of Christ's Body. It's about the work we do to make worship happen as ushers and music ministers and acolytes and altar guild and Eucharistic ministers and readers. It's about the work we do at the Mustard Seed in Worcester and through Cristosal in El Salvador and reading Morning Prayer at the Holden Nursing Home and teaching our children and our children's children the faith we have received. It's about making a joyful noise to the Lord with our voices and with guitars and organ and piano and violin and bells. It's about the Church Mouse Fair and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" and summer barbecues on rainy days.*

*A colleague of mine says the work of discipleship is about the move from guest to host. I offer that as we begin again on this weekend. For some people this transition from guest to host will take days or weeks or months; for others it may take years or even decades. Some people will step up on their second week here and say, "here is what I feel called to," and others will need to be coaxed into stepping out of their comfort zones. No matter; we take it at our own pace. But it is a move we are all invited to eventually make.*

*At some point each of us walked through the doors of this church as a guest and somebody welcomed us in. You might have a clear visual image of the person or persons who did that and if you do, then take a moment to give thanks for that welcome and their ministry to you. Maybe you were not noticed on the first week you came here and it took longer than you wished it would take. Perhaps you didn't really want to be noticed in the beginning, so you sat in the back and*

*snuck in late and left early. But if you are still here, then at some level it must have seemed like this was the kind of place that might eventually feel like "home." If it was difficult for you to be a guest here then learn from that and as you make the move from being guest to host, help make the transition easier for the next person who walks through these doors. If you were not welcomed here as you wished to be welcomed, then consider this your opportunity to make sure the person newer than you has a different and better experience, because for that new guest you are now the face of St. Francis.*

*What I think my friend means by moving from being a guest to becoming a host (or at least what I mean by stealing his words!) is that there comes a point in our faith journey when we realize that it is time to take the next step. That, of course, is what today's gospel reading from the eighth chapter of Mark's Gospel is all about. Interestingly it comes at almost the exact midpoint of Mark's Gospel. Peter and the rest of the gang are about to shift from being students sitting at Jesus' feet watching all that he can do to being called his friends and entrusted to share in his life work: not only the healing and teaching and preaching, but the suffering of the Cross as well.*

*Lord knows, St. Francis Church is far from perfect, and it doesn't take more than a few weeks to figure that out! Some days the liturgy drags along and some days the sermon is like a dribbler back to the pitcher for an easy out. Some days a church school teacher may not be fully prepared or the choir may take on an anthem beyond their abilities or the acolyte forgets what she is supposed to do. We are not called to perfection and we are not perfect. But we are called to be faithful. We set the bar high and then count on an abundance of grace to make up the difference. As I begin my twelfth fall as the rector of this parish I can honestly say that this is a faithful parish, with God's help.*

*When people begin to make that move from being guests to hosts, we are all renewed and strengthened: we are revitalized as a parish community. To those of you who have only been a here a year or two, or a month or two, especially if you still feel like a guest, I say this:*

*Know how glad we are that you are here. Know also that we don't want you to feel like a guest forever, but to share with us in the work to which we feel called. The move from being guest to host begins with prayer and with listening. Know that no one here is expected to do it all. God doesn't want burned out Christians! Rather, by sharing the work we find ourselves participating in something much larger than ourselves and our own ego needs.*

*So on the way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who are people saying that I am?" Then as now, that isn't always immediately clear. Some say a great rabbi, a teacher, which is certainly a title used to refer to Jesus in the Scriptures. Even people who do not call themselves Christians can see that Jesus was a smart guy who told funny stories and challenged people to*

*think about the world around them in new ways. There are people out there who are fans of Jesus even if they are frustrated with His Church, and even people who aren't big on "organized religion" can see the wisdom in the Sermon on the Mount. Others will say that Jesus was a prophet like John the Baptist or Elijah or maybe like Mohandas or Bobby or Martin: that he challenged the status quo and invited people to dream of what might yet be, and then to work toward that day. Surely Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels is a rabbi and prophet and people not only in Jesus' own day but in our own time can see him as such.*

*But by the grace of God, there comes a point in our journeys when we are no longer merely among the crowds. It's hard to say how it happens exactly because it is different and unique to each of us and to our own peculiar journeys. We may have been away for a while from the Church and are now finding our way back. Or something may have happened in our lives to shake the foundations: a marriage or a divorce, a birth or a death. And we find ourselves at a crossroads.*

*If we aren't careful, we may well find ourselves saying with Peter, "you are the Messiah—you are the Christ." And that changes everything. It changes everything because it commits us to seek and to serve this Christ in all we do. It binds us together not only with Jesus but with the community of people who bear his name, the community that is trying to follow him more dearly, more nearly, more clearly. Always with God's help.*

