

<i>Date Preached</i>	04-Oct-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	22-Sept-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Pr 22, Yr A (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>			

" [T]he kingdom of God will be ... given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. "



Perhaps we should chalk all this up to a rookie mistake. So fond am I of the tradition of blessing animals around the time of the Church's annual commemoration of St Francis of Assisi ... that I fear I did things a bit backwards: I first explored the idea of having a blessing of the animals here at St Andrew's this day. When the feedback was positive, I went ahead and publicized it. Only *then* did I actually look at the readings appointed for today.

Now, perhaps a more experienced priest would have felt comfortable sliding us over to the readings appointed for St Francis, but because today is a Sunday and almost nothing takes precedence over our weekly Sunday liturgy, I, as a weeks-old priest, didn't feel comfortable making such a switch. And so, here we sit,

(8:30) on a day we ponder our pets in worship,
(10:30) several minutes away from the happy blessing of our loving and beloved companions,

confronted with lessons about the destruction of vineyards—overgrown, parched and trampled down; and the wicked tenants of another vineyard so fixed upon their own devices that they kill every emissary the owner sends to collect his rents ... even the owner's son. How ... how, I asked myself in a mild panic, am I to preach *this* to a congregation whose collective mind may be running more to puppies and guinea pigs? ... I think—I *hope*—I have found a way.

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When I was in second grade, our class play that year was Dr Seuss' *The Lorax*, which had been published a few years earlier. Even though I played the Onceler, the evil protagonist, I confess I remember relatively little about the production other than recording my lines, with my teacher's help, into a then-very novel invention called a "portable tape recorder." But I recently went back and did a little research:

The Onceler arrives in the Truffulah forest and immediately discovers that the Truffulah tree produces fibers that can be knit into a highly versatile article—good for everything from clothing your body to cleaning your carburetor—called a Thneed. The Onceler begins his Thneed business by felling a single Truffulah tree at a time ... and knitting each Thneed by hand. Soon, however, business is booming, and, over the strenuous objections of the Lorax, who "speaks for the trees," the Onceler invents a Super-Axe-Hacker that can cut down whole stands of trees in one fell swoop ... and he builds a giant Thneed factory that belches so much black smoke and produces so much waste goo that the Swōmee-Swans can no longer fly and the Humming-Fish can no longer hum because "their gills are all gummed." The Onceler—whose objective has now become "biggering and biggering" everything in his life—clear cuts the forest, erects lavish hotels and posh

homes on the land and is raking in millions until ... until the last Truffulah tree falls, and no more Thneeds can be made, whatever the need. Soon, he is left all alone, in a scowly, sooty, smelly wasteland unfit for any life that's worth living.

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The Lorax is an allegorical tale about human stewardship of the environment ... and our readings today are unequivocally *not* about the environment—at least not God's *physical* creation. Isaiah and St Matthew use images of creation ... of our interaction with the natural life that surrounds us ... in order to make larger, more abstract theological points—points we can, perhaps, explore the *next* time these readings appear in our lectionary. Today, however, I would, of all things, like to place Dr Seuss in conversation with Isaiah and Matthew. With apologies to every literature teacher I've ever had, I'd like to suggest that, for once, it may benefit us to look at the *surface* level of their texts: to take the images of nature these writers use to teach repentance of sin and faithfulness and the ongoing-ness of God's revelation ... and to understand them almost literally ... as cautionary tales, similar to Dr Seuss', about stewardship of creation that is too careless ... or too harsh.

The vineyard—the Promised Land of Israel—that God prepared and placed in the hands of the People of God has come to produce inedible fruit because, the prophet Isaiah tells them, they did not attentively cultivate it. Rather than working the land to make it more fruitful and expanding its arable acreage to accommodate more farmers, they overlooked the fields and fell to squabbling so viciously about who owned which portion of the vineyard that they didn't notice its going to seed and becoming worthless ... much like the Onceler, who he can't see that he's rapidly destroying the very source of his own wealth.

In Matthew, Jesus speaks of a different—and yet, also the same—vineyard. This time, however, the issue is hardly inattentiveness: These tenants are hell-bent on wringing every last cent out of the land that they can. What they don't seem to appreciate is that they are merely tenants, and not owners. The work they do is both made possible by and for the benefit of someone other than themselves. No one questions their entitlement to a fair profit on their labor, but they literally commit murder in an attempt to seize ownership of land they merely hold in trust for its true owner. Likewise, the Onceler: Not content with the good income and pleasant life that come with hand knitting his Thneeds, he builds a Thneed *empire* ... and in so doing, banishes all the animals who have called the Truffulah forest home since time immemorial.

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Our readings today—at least on their surface—teach us about the hand-in-hand issues of gratitude and reciprocity ... or, to state it in the negative, of *ingratitude* and dominion. We live surrounded—quite literally surrounded—by countless physical expressions of God's love and generosity toward us as God's creatures, and our right response to those expressions is gratitude. Not an empty or fleeting gratitude of the lips, but a sweaty, dirty-kneed, sore-musled gratitude of cultivation: of dressing, pruning, harvesting, pressing and planting again, in order to multiply and share the value of God's gifts with all, including future generations. But, at the same time, our right response to God's love and generosity also exercises restraint: Because we sit, seemingly, atop the food-chain or evolutionary cycle, beneath the gaze of a God Who is invisible, we must beware our tendency to think, like the wicked tenants, that we *own* all we see and can dispose of it any way we desire. Dominion is the province of God alone. *Our* calling is to prosper God's vineyard in

reciprocity ... with and for God and God's creatures; not to shove them out of the way so we can sell a few more Thneeds or cases of wine.

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And so ... on this 'crypto-St Francis Day,' I'd like to suggest that the animals many of us welcome into our lives teach us exactly the lessons of gratitude and reciprocity every day of the year. On the one hand, no pet or domestic animal will survive, let alone thrive, if we are inattentive to its care or take its well-being for granted. Rather, our animals are living, breathing, natural opportunities for us to live out our gratitude to God by sacrificing our time, our money, our space and our love wholly for the benefit of another. On the other hand, we also fail our pets or other animals if we hold them too closely; control them too harshly; or exclude others from their love and companionship. Our animals are under our care, but they have their own dignity in the eyes of God. God calls us not to dominate them, but to reciprocate the love God shows us by our showing the qualities of that *same* love, to them.

What our pets teach us is the practice of sound cultivation—the responsible stewardship—that lies between the paired sins of inattentiveness and domination. Just as there is—however briefly—a sweet spot in the tale of *The Lorax* when the Onceler is constructively stewarding the Truffulah forest by hand-knitting his Thneeds and the Truffulah forest is thriving, so our pets call us to respond to their presence and joy in our lives with love and attention, but without dominating or exploiting them. They teach us how to be the hands of God in this world: by showing forth love that cares more than it must ... but exercises less power than it can: indeed, the very same love that Christ never ceases showing us.



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