

* * *

Not In Order To But Because Of

* * *

a homily by
Bill Kerley, Th. D.
based on
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 6:20-26

Pope Francis is coming to town. Well, not actually to Houston but he is coming to the United States and he is going to go, among other places, to Philadelphia. More about the irony of that in a moment.

Thirteen of us from St. Paul's, actually people who attend the Ordinary Life gathering, have just returned from a conference put on by Richard Rohr's "Center for Action and Contemplation. The conference was called "The Francis Factor." There were two men named Francis who were the focus of attention. Pope Francis was one and St. Francis of Assisi was the other.

I learned a lot about both of these saintly men. One interesting bit of trivia I learned is that Pope Francis hasn't watched television since 1991. Of course, St. Francis never watched television at all. (They did "like" each other on Facebook.)

At this conference I met a most interesting and unusual person. This man may actually embody the teachings of Jesus more than any person I have met.

For example, though he does things to generate a great deal of money - like write and publish bestselling books and is in high demand as a speaker all around the world, he and his wife live in a communal setting in Philadelphia. I thought it was an interesting coincidence that the pope will be visiting this city. I'm sure you know that "Philadelphia" means "the city of brotherly love." It also has one of the highest murder rates of any city in this country. This man and his wife live there on an income of \$200 a month. He so does not want what he consumes to ride on the back of anyone who might be taken advantage of that he makes his own clothes, including his shoes. He has spent time working with Mother Teresa and, after the invasion of Iraq, he went to Bagdad to be with those being bombed as a way of saying, not all Americans or Christians are like this.

He writes about his life and life style of this radical distribution of resources this way: "It's important to understand that redistribution comes from community, not before

community. Redistribution is not a prescription for community. Redistribution is a description of what happens when people fall in love with each other across class lines. When the Bible tells the story of the early church in the book of Acts, it does not say that they were of one heart and mind because they sold everything. Rather, they held all in common precisely because they were of one heart and mind, as rich and poor found themselves born again into a family in which some had extra and others were desperately in need. Redistribution was not systematically regimented but flowed naturally out of a love for God and neighbor. I am not a communist, nor am I am capitalist. . . . When we truly discover love, capitalism will not be possible and [communism] will not be necessary.”

The group that this man is a part of has no medical insurance. Every month, and this is a nationwide group, they get a newsletter of who is in the hospital or has medical needs. They pray for these people and then put their money together to get bills paid. Since 1993 they have done over \$500,00,000 dollars of medical bills. That’s half a billion dollars. It's how they do health care.

This man's name is Shane Claiborne and you can either, as they now say, "Google" him or read one of his books. Our senior minister has had him come and speak when Tommy was at another church and the book he recommended I read before going to hear him was, “The Irresistible Revolution.” I read it and had thoughts like: How much of a “Christian” am I? Am I willing to live like this?

I thought about Pope Francis, St. Francis and Shane Claiborne as I reflected on the lectionary texts for today. I don’t know what you know about Colossians. It is one of the finest writings we have in the Christian Testament. It is one of the most liturgical writings we have containing a magnificent hymn about the Cosmic Christ. This is one of the things that makes some biblical scholars question whether Paul wrote it or one of Paul’s disciples. There is the notion that you do find in the letters of Paul as well as those attributed to him of what it means to be “in Christ.” “En Cristo” is the phrase that you will find in these writings over and over. “If anyone is 'in Christ,' that person is a new creation.” Sadly, many people think that “Christ” is Jesus’ last name. Joseph and Mary Christ had a baby and named him Jesus.

“Christ” is the word Paul uses for God’s creation that has existed for all time and which is seen manifest, at least for Christians, in Jesus. It is the same notion you find in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the word.” Jesus is a manifestation of that

word that has been true from the beginning. My spiritual teacher said that you could substitute the word “blueprint” for both the “word” and “Christ.” “In the beginning was ‘the blueprint.’”

In this section in Colossians Paul, or whoever wrote it, writes, and rather forcefully I might add, about the ethical implications that grow out of one being “in Christ,” or one becoming aware that this is where we live and move and have our being. We are to conform to "the blueprint."

Marcus Borg, whom I’m going to refer to in the homily on Sunday, has performed a marvelous service by putting out a version of the New Testament where the books are published in the chronological order in which they were written. Thessalonians comes first. Followed by Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Mark, James and, then, Colossians - around the year 60. Another twenty years followed before Luke was written. Luke was the last of the four gospels in the Christian testament to be written.

What we read from Luke today contains Luke’s version of what most of us know as “the beatitudes.” In Matthew the collection is part of what is referred to as “The Sermon on the Mount.” Here they are part of a collection referred to as “The Sermon on the Plain.”

Whether from Luke or Matthew, these teachings reflect the life and lifestyle of people who lived out their experience of being transformed people. When the Christian movement became the official religion of the Roman Empire, it became something else. Richard Rohr says it became a frosting on top of a non-cake.

The vision Jesus had and taught about God, about the world, about people is like getting a new operating system upgrade by which to see the world and ourselves and others and to live life. Jesus and Paul sought to replace the emphasis on win/lose, exclusion, righteousness with teachings about the grace of God that seeks to get us to live in a totally new world.

I think it is clear that living out what it means to be “in Christ” or the vision of a new world Jesus had in mind is pretty hard to see evidence of in our culture. That’s why I’m grateful to people like Shane Claiborne who come along to say, “There is another way.”

One of the ways passages from our tradition have been misheard and misused is for people to read them and then think, “OK. If I do these things, then I’ll be okay.” Whatever “okay” means. “God will love me.” “I’ll go to heaven when I die.” Whatever.

They have been read from the standpoint of “in order to get something, then I’ll live this way.”

What both the reading from Colossians and from Luke are saying is that because we already are in Christ and live in the Kingdom now, this is how we live.

What these passages are calling for is a change in consciousness. I think that is why Pope Francis is getting such attention. People sense a change. I think this is why there is a renewed interest in the life and teachings of St. Francis. People sense that doing it the way we have been doing is doesn’t give us a sustainable future. I think this is why people like Shane Claiborne and communities like the “new monastic movement” are coming into being. We need a new consciousness. An awareness of waking up to our true identity and the realm in which we live move us to new levels of behavior.

Jesus didn’t make dogmatic statements about how to get to heaven. Rather, he modeled and taught how to live on earth in a loving way and he called that way of living being in heaven. The church has too often pushed heaven into the future and made the teachings of Jesus into a reward and punishment system for the next world. This creates tremendously self-absorbed and self-preoccupied people. It doesn't transform anyone into compassionate, loving individuals. Rather it leads to a kind of morbid self-analysis where people feel guilty, inferior and inadequate or where they feel superior and self-righteous.

So, please don’t hear either Paul or Jesus offering anything but love. Love is what the journey is about. When, as Shane says, we love, the rest will take care of itself. You cannot easily get to love when you begin with threats or appeals to fear.

Jesus said, “You live in the Kingdom or heart of God but you don't see it.” Paul said, “You live and move and have your being in Christ. Live like it.”

We, at least I, need this system upgrade, this new consciousness on an ongoing basis.

Imagine that you are walking along a sidewalk. Your arms are full of groceries. Someone roughly bumps into you so that you fall to the ground along with all your groceries, strewn over the ground. As you rise up from the puddle of broken eggs and tomato juice, you are ready to shout out, “You idiot! What’s wrong with you? Are you blind?”

But just before you can catch your breath to speak, you see that the person who bumped into you actually is blind. He, too, is sprawled in the spilled groceries, and your anger vanishes in an instant, to be replaced by sympathetic concern: “Are you hurt? Can I help you?”

Our situation is like that. We live immersed in a sea of disharmony and misery. That is the condition of most people who live on this planet. The source of this misery and disharmony is ignorance of who we truly are and where we truly live. When we open the eyes and ears of our heart to see and hear, it is like getting a major system upgrade.