

Standing With Jesus

I am not an authority on St. Francis. (The image shown is the oldest surviving depiction of St. Francis. It is a fresco near the entrance of a Benedictine abbey of Subiaco, painted around March 1228.) St. Francis was born Giovanni de Bernardone in Assisi in 1181 and died at the age of 42 in 1226.

I can point you to many people who are authorities on St. Francis. Among those would be Sister Dr. Ilia Delio and Father Richard Rohr, people I refer to frequently. They both belong to the Franciscan Order.

I would imagine that most of you have likely seen the movie about the life of St. Francis, “Brother Sun, Sister Moon.” My hunch is that most everyone here has heard what is known as “The Prayer of St. Francis.”

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
O Master, let me not seek as much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

The fact of the matter is that this prayer cannot be traced back further than 1912 and was not, obviously, written by St. Francis. As one authority on St. Francis says, “As noble as its sentiments are, Francis would not have written such a piece,

focused as it is on the self, with its constant repetition of the pronouns 'I' and 'me,' the words 'God' and 'Jesus' never appearing once." Finding this out is a shock for many people. Especially those entering the Franciscan order.

This prayer/poem even appears in the Methodist Hymnal and is mis-attributed to St. Francis.

What I have just shared with you is something of a metaphor of part of what I think my work is as a spiritual teacher. And, that is to provide correct information, to correct misinformation, to contribute to religious literacy.

Richard Rohr, who is a Franciscan and an authority on St. Francis, says that the prayer St. Francis prayed over and over and over was, "God, who are you? God, who am I?" Those two questions are going to guide our work going forward - Who is God? Or, whatever you mean when you use or refuse to use the word "God." And, who are you?

Francis didn't know. One of the things that marks the lives of saints and mystics in all traditions is the quality of "not-knowing." What Francis did know was that living with and through those questions was the way to walk the spiritual path.

The prayer Meister Eckhart prayed over and over was, "God, deliver me from God." That is to say, deliver me from the stance of thinking I know, control, understand, need to defend you.

After we have managed, as everyone in this room has, to resolve the ego's need for security and survival, it is time to turn our attention elsewhere. Both our ego and our culture seduce us into focusing on issues of esteem, affection, power and control to the point that if we are not careful we will lose our lives in the process of trying to save them.

Who are you, God? And, who am I?

These are the questions that shape the spiritual journey.

I will continue to use the teachings of Jesus as my central reference point of departure in an on-going attempt to look at these questions. Not to provide answers. The teachings of Jesus can be our guide in showing us how to stand within our culture, with our culture, against our culture and in service to our culture.

This talk today serves as an introduction, if you will, to the intentions I have for my teachings going forward.

The over-arching theme I'm giving to the direction we will be going, and it is the title for today's talk, is "Standing With Jesus." Frankly, I was a smidgen hesitant to use this title because Jesus has been so hi-jacked by Western culture and religion as hardly to be recognizable. I want to add my part to correcting this massive misperception.

If we are going to do those things - stand within our culture, with our culture, against our culture and in service to our culture - we are likely, especially if we have been raised in and/or exposed to much of Western/United States Christianity, going to have to work through a lot of things that we have just somewhat taken for granted, or have been unconscious about, as being true.

For example, most of popular, usually what is called "evangelical Christianity," focuses on teachings about Jesus. Was he the "Son of God?" Was he born of a virgin? Did he die for our sins? Was he physically resurrected? And, so on. For well over fifteen years now my teaching has focused on teachings of Jesus rather than about Jesus. I'm going to continue this emphasis. I have a lot more to learn from the teachings of Jesus.

By the way, someone asked me in a discussion group the other day what I was. This is a question that makes no sense to me. As you have heard me say on a gazillion occasions, besides the importance of not exaggerating, don't fall for labels. Any label you put on yourself is a trap. I asked the person for clarification. "Are you a liberal, a conservative or what? I've never heard a Methodist or a Christian talk like you."

“I don’t want to be defined or confined by the label ‘Methodist.’ Further, tell me what you think a Christian is, and I’ll tell you whether I am that or not.” I got that line from Matt Russell and think it is just brilliant.

Then, I said: “I am a radical conservative liberal. Or, a liberal conservative radical. Or, perhaps a conservative liberal radical.”

You see, I think I am very conservative. I want to get back, way back, to who Jesus was and what he said and not settle for some nineteenth century interpretation of him. I want to conserve the values that were part of the community and country I grew up with: working for community wellbeing, living with integrity, and taking personal responsibility. Nobody I grew up with or around had an attitude of entitlement. When the Japanese attacked this country by bombing Pearl Harbor we all came together to deal with a common threat. Today, the notion of a cyber attack on our election process by a foreign government only fuels partisan politics. That disturbs my conservative values.

I am also very liberal. Look it up in the dictionary. It means favoring progress, reform, it means being generous, and implies freedom. It is a word that favors what is best for the people. We all prefer to be around generous, giving people.

And, I am a radical. The word “radical” means “root.” It is the same word we get the word “radish” from. A radical wants to get to the root of the matter, not to stay on the surface. The huge sin of our culture, and something that might well do us in, is the incredible superficiality of our culture.

Jesus was a conservative liberal radical. And, he calls us to follow him.

He wanted to reform his own religion, take it back to its roots, conserve the best about it and open its close-minded leaders to the radical message of the Jewish prophets.

I was talking over my ideas for this talk today with a dear friend of mine telling him about my liberal/conservative/radical piece and he reminded me of something that John Dominic Crossan said that fits perfectly here.

By the way, I don't expect you to read all the books you hear about in here. But, I do want you to know about them. They are to me valuable resources and they might be, at some point, the same for you. Plus, I want you to know that not only am I not making this stuff up but that I am basing what I teach on the best of contemporary scholarship regarding the matters I talk to you about.

If you are not acquainted with the works of Marcus Borg, who has spoken in this room several times and who died just a couple of years ago, I encourage you to check out his works. Up until his death he was one of the leading living authorities on Jesus and, if you have not read any of his works, I'd start with "Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time." That's such a brilliant title. Most people who claim to be Christian think they know all they need to know about Jesus but my hunch is that if you read this book, you'll discover things you didn't know. All of Borg's works are important. (A joke among people who are interested in "progressive Christianity" was to call themselves "Borg-Again Christians.")

Another man who has influenced the contemporary scholarship regarding Jesus is John Dominic Crossan. His book, "Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography," is another eye opener.

A few years ago Crossan was scheduled to speak here and Jim Bankston, our senior minister at the time, arranged to have him preach in the worship services as well. Crossan is a diminutive, passionate religious scholar and spiritual man. It was after he was here that I got and read his auto-biography. He calls it his spiritual memoir. His book on Jesus is, "Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography." Crossan's own autobiography is, "A Long Way From Tipperary: What a former Irish monk discovered in his search for truth." Reading that book was a powerful, spiritual experience for me. I want to read you the last three paragraphs of the book because he gets at what my friend reminded me of when I described myself as a radical conservative liberal.

"In conclusion, this is what I have learned between Ireland and America, monastery and university, priesthood and marriage, academic scholarship and public discourse. I have learned that God is more radical than we can ever imagine, that a divine utopia on this earth is more subversive than we can ever accept, and

that Pilate acted for us all when he executed Jesus. But let me repeat that in an autobiographical anecdote.

“Sarah and I are good friends with Marianne Borg, a canon of Portland’s Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, and her husband, Marcus Borg, who holds an endowed chair at Oregon State University. Marcus is also one of the handful of scholars who have spent their professional life in historical Jesus research. In early March 1999 they invited Sarah and me to Oregon, first for a Thursday class and lecture at the university and then for a Friday through Sunday seminar at the cathedral. After the opening session on Friday night, I was seated at a small table signing books. As I finished one book’s inscription, its owner said, ‘My pastor told me not to come here tonight because you are even to the left of Borg.’

“‘Give your pastor my best regards,’ I replied, ‘and tell him that is the good news. The bad news is that both Borg and Crossan are to the right of Jesus. And worse still, if he will recall Psalm 110, Jesus is to the right of God.’”

The questions of St. Francis - Who are you, God? And, who am I? - will also help form an agenda for us going forward in our effort to learn about and be empowered to “stand with Jesus.” Indeed, the teachings of Jesus will serve as resources to help us answer those questions.

They are never fully or completely answered until we lose consciousness.

My favorite teaching story about who we are is one that I haven’t used in here for three years. Like any good story, though, it bears repeating from time to time. (Just wanted you to know that I know when I last used it.)

Here it is:

As an intern, part of my work was to travel around in teams, examining patients. I would notice their look as we entered. Intimidated, apprehensive, feeling like case studies of various illnesses. I hated that. But I was an intern.

I remember one guy distinctly, however, who was altogether different. I think this guy changed my life. He was a black man in his sixties - very cute, very

mischievous, and very sick. What brought us repeatedly to him was the utter complexity of his illness, condition on top of condition, and the mystery of why he was still alive. It was so strange. We were visiting not to find out what was wrong with him, but why he was still here at all. I had the feeling he could see right through us. He'd say, "Hey, boys!" when we'd come in - the way you might when a gang of ten-year-olds come barging into a house for a snack in the middle of an intense game outside. He was so pleased, and so amused. It made some people nervous. I was intrigued. But for some weeks, I never had a chance to be alone with him. Now and then he'd give into very serious trouble, and he'd be moved into intensive care. Then he'd rally, to everyone's amazement, and we'd move him back. And we'd visit him again, and he'd say, "You boys here again?" - pretending to be surprised that we were still around.

One night there was an emergency, and I took the initiative and went to see him alone. He looked pretty bad. But he came alert a few seconds after I entered. He gave me a grin and said, "Well....," sort of like he'd expected me. Like he'd known how much I'd come to love him. That happens in hospitals.

I imagine I looked a little surprised at the "Well....," but we just laughed a minute, and I stood there just so taken by who he was. And then he hit me with a single remark, half a question and half a . . . something else.

"Who you?" he said, sort of smiling. Just that. "Who you?"

I started to say, "Well, I'm Doctor . . ." And then I just stopped cold. It's hard to describe. I just sort of went out. What happened was that all kinds of answers to his question started to go through my head. They all seemed true, but they all seemed less than true. "Yeah, I'm this or I'm that . . . and also . . . but not just . . . and that's not the whole picture, the whole picture is . . ." The thought process went something like that. Nothing remotely like that had ever happened to me. But I remember feeling very elated.

It must have shown, because he gave me this big grin and said, "Nice to meet you." His timing killed me.

We talked for five minutes about this and that - nothing in particular; children, I think. At the end, I ventured to say, "Is there anything I can do for you?" He said, "No, I'm just fine. Thanks very much . . . Doctor . . .?" And he paused for the name, and I gave it to him this time, and he grinned at me again, really he did. And that was it.

He died a few days later. And I carry him around today. I think of him now and again in the midst of my rounds. A particular moment or a particular patient brings him back. "Who you?" For years I'd trained to be a physician, and I almost got lost in it. This man took away my degree and then gave it back to me with "And also?...and also...and also?" scribbled across. I'll never forget that.

We slap a label on ourselves and get lost in that identity. We get trapped by that identity. The point of the story is to help us get the importance of answering the "who you?" question. None could be more important. So, apart from your personal history and what you do - who you?

I'll be so bold as to say this:

The biggest enemy of God is organized religion.

The biggest barrier to standing with Jesus is the Bible.

In the talk I gave in here a few weeks ago called "Creative Deconstruction," I began to hint at some of this. I certainly don't want to come across as a negative, Bible-bashing person. But, I do think it is useful to expose the misuse of Scripture as a way to introduce people to a way to recover the true depth and meaning of texts that, I believe, enable and even empower us to see the divine image in the face of every person and to assist in calling everyone, ourselves included, into fuller life and living. In its pages we can discover what it might mean to stand with Jesus.

Paul Tillich, a theologian who has had incredible shaping influence on me and my teaching, wrote: "The Bible is a subject of interpretation: there is no doctrine, no prophet, no priest, no power, which has not claimed biblical sanctions for itself."

The Bible is a strange and powerful book. It has been a best-seller every year since it was first printed. Indeed, when the Gutenberg press was invented, the Bible was its first production.

Whether you have ever read the Bible or not, and that is not something I would recommend you just sit down and do without a good guidebook in hand. I would refer you to another one of Marcus Borg's excellent works: "Reading the Bible Again For the First Time."

Even if you have never read the Bible, you have been influenced by it and words, ideas and phrases from it populate your unconscious. There have been many motion pictures dramatizing biblical stories. Phrases from it have worked their way into our language: green pastures, east of Eden, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, for crying out loud, sour grapes, holding out the olive branch and, one of my mother's favorites - she used it as a swear word, "Land of Goshen." (It was that section of Egypt that housed the Jewish slaves.)

But, in the history of the Western world, the Bible has left a trail of pain, horror, blood and death. That fact, which Shelby Spong devotes an entire book to, "The Sins of Scripture," is not often allowed to rise to consciousness. Some of my teaching going forward is going to be an attempt to correct this.

There is this profound paradox: the Bible has been used by those who believe it to be God's word to kill and to justify killing and to oppress others. Passages from the Bible have been used to bless the bloodiest of wars. As Spong writes, "People committed to the Bible have not refrained from using the cruelest forms of torture on those whom they believe to have been revealed as the enemies of God in these 'sacred' scriptures." The Bible has been used to justify violence done to racial minorities, women, Jews and homosexuals. This may be hard for some Christians to understand but it is not difficult at all to document.

We must look at this: How is it possible that the Bible, universally revered in Western religious circles, could be the source of so much evil? There is no other word for it. Can this be turned around? Can the Bible be seen as a source of the kind of life Jesus talked about and that I describe as being marked by peace, love, joy and patience?

Along with Borg, I want to take the Bible seriously and not literally. No one truly does. Not even people who say they do. Such people actually “cherry pick” passages that support their point of view.

I have a multitude of reasons for wanting to do this work. For one thing, the Bible was given to me as the foundational and identity document of my faith, given to me as the English language was given to me. I grew up in a house filled with Bibles. There is now in our living room the family Bible that was handed down generation to generation. The earliest entry in this one is from 1891. There is in it a blue ribbon from the Tennessee Centennial in 1897. In it are recorded the births, deaths and marriages of generations.

Bible stories were part of the curriculum of both church Sunday School and of public schools. Public school in the south were little more than Protestant parochial schools. Every school I attended until I went away to military school began with a prayer and a Bible story or passage.

The Bible was treated unlike any other book. It was printed unlike any other book, except perhaps the dictionary, with two columns on a page. It was related to in the same way: you went to it for answers to life’s difficult questions. It was referred to, as it still is in most churches with some version of “this is the word of God” or “so ends the Holy Gospel.” The Bible was treated as a separate, sacred and special, unlike-any-other book. In Islam, their Sacred Scripture, the Koran, is treated even more so.

Maybe because a love for the Bible is given to so many people so early that people fail to note its gory passages, passages that simply don’t fit with the images of a loving and forgiving God. The fact is that in the Bible there are passages that are very disturbing, malevolent and, even, as I said, evil.

Add to that the fact that I grew up privileged. I don’t mean economically. My family was economically modest. What I’m referring to is the fact that I was white, male, heterosexual and Christian and the Bible, or so I was taught, affirmed the value of each of these privileged designations. It was clearly preferable to be white and than a person of color; male, as all depictions of God were male rather than

female; normal as to sexual orientation rather than “abnormal” as homosexuality was thought and taught to be; and Christian which everyone knew was the one true religion. I grew up infected by each of these notions.

I had the inordinate good fortune to encounter some people along the way who showed me what Karl Bart, the theologian who gave me back the Bible, called “the strange new world” that was contained in the pages of the Bible. They taught me that, to put it in the briefest of all sentences, the Bible was not written for us but for a particular people in a specific time and we could, by freeing it from those constraints, find the relevancy of it for our times and lives.

You know, I love what I get to do in here. If there is such a thing as a calling, I’m doing what I was meant and fit to do - teach.

I believe there are things in the Judeo-Christian tradition that will contribute to the transformation of our lives and our world if we will liberate and be liberated by them. They are not things you hear often in church but to hear them and speak them is what I mean by standing with Jesus.

Jesus says, there is only way to tell if someone has gotten my message: love.

Jesus says, the realm of reality where God is is here and now, not off out there or somewhere else. You don’t have to go anywhere to get to heaven.

Jesus says, unless you have reached perfection - which is an absolutely lousy idea in spirit work, it belongs in the field of mathematics - don’t judge anyone else.

Jesus says, the way to peace is giving up trying to control things and people to make you feel safe, secure and happy. It will never work.

Jesus says, thinking that you have the truth figured out actually arranges it so you would not know the truth if it snuck up behind you and hit you on it head.

Jesus says, don’t make a religion out of me. Rather embrace and give expression to my spirit and truth. Many may think you are a heretic and you may even get kicked

out of a church or two or snubbed as being heretical. Don't worry, you're on the right track.

Jesus says, don't claim to love God and then hate people in whatever form you do. Those two things can't be true at the same time.

Jesus said, God told me that I was his, I belonged to God. So do you. Quit fearing that you are somehow separated. You never have been.

Jesus says, Quit apologizing for being human. If humanity is an affront to God, how could I be one with God.

Jesus says, God is not up in the sky. You want to see God? You are looking at God when you truly see me. Go look in the mirror. That's what God looks like.

Paul Tillich, whom I referred to earlier, wrote some words that serve as one of my over-arching goals for all of our times together:

“I want only to show you something I have seen and to tell you something I have heard. Which is that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a new creation.”

I believe we'll see this new creation more clearly when we develop the courage, the resources, the willingness and will to stand with Jesus.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.