

Radical Faithfulness

Philippians 3: 4b-14

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When Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was elected pope and took a new name, many folks were glad when he took the name Francis. I know I was. Francis was a lover of all creation and a servant to the poor. It was a great choice.

Many folks, however, were probably *also* glad that he didn't take the name of Paul, in some form or variation. Because many folks don't like Paul. They accuse him of being a male chauvinist, an anti-Semite, an oppressor when it comes to issues like slavery and human sexuality.

Who was it? Howard Thurman's grandmother, that refused to read anything written by Paul, because she herself had been a slave ... and Paul, reportedly, told slaves "to be obedient to their masters."

Reportedly is the operative word there, because no serious student of the Bible would attribute those words found in Ephesians and Colossians and Titus to the authentic Paul. Many scholars—those who are defenders of Paul—feel as though he gets a bad wrap. How would you like someone saying something you didn't say?

Many scholars, like Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan, say that Paul was much more in the spirit of Jesus, preaching an egalitarian, liberating, love-based message. Saying authentic things like, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; we are all one in Christ Jesus." Doing things like telling Philemon to take back the runaway slave, Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother.

Paul gets a bad wrap because people say that he distorted the message of Jesus. "Not so," say many scholars. On the contrary, Paul was immersed in the spirit of Jesus. Passionate about the message of Jesus. Transformed by the presence of Jesus.

You heard it a moment ago, in the Philippians reading. No one doubts that Paul wrote the letter from a jail cell, surprisingly with a lot warmth and joy. He cannot say enough about his love

and devotion to Jesus the Christ. He rattles off his impressive list of credentials: circumcised on the eighth day; born of the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew of Hebrews; honors when it comes to living the law—Phi Beta Pharisee, as I’ve heard it put.

But all of that, he says, pales in comparison to what he has gained through his experience of knowing Jesus the Christ. It wasn’t that the old was inherently bad or wrong in anyway. It was just that for Paul, and others, this Christ—through the Spirit—could live within and through him in a way that made him more than he ever dreamed he could be.

This experience gave him assurance, purpose, a new perspective with which to live. Since Damascus—where he saw the light and heard the voice of Christ—he had begun to live in a new, transformed way.

With a depth, an intentionality, a peace—that was more than he had ever had before. It’s like what an older Franciscan told Brennan Manning on the day he took his vows. He said, “Once you come to know the love of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the world will seem as beautiful or desirable.”

Paul would agree. He is still skilled in the study and use of scripture. He is still a member of the people of Israel. He is still zealous in his work. But, what has changed is the perspective out of which he lives his life. A perspective defined by the Christ he has encountered.

This encounter becomes his touchstone, his way, his deepest place out of which he lives his life. He gives up persecuting others, in favor of announcing this gospel of love and grace which has experienced through Christ. That’s Paul.

You might prefer the name Francis like Cardinal Bergoglio did, but Paul isn’t so bad either. You could do worse. Paul is a worthy name and example.

What’s any of this got to do with the project that I did for Lexington Theological Seminary, along with nine members of my congregation? Well, just this—like Paul, members of our group were trying to go deeper, shooting for some kind of transformative experience, rummaging around in the realm of religious mysticism.

People like Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan call Paul a Jewish Christ mystic, who had somehow seen and heard the risen Lord, encountered him, experienced him—changing and deepening his life.

The members of our group were shooting for some of that . . . some firsthand experience of God, some religious experience that one can call one's own (instead of that which had been passed on to us by our parents or churches or whomever). Something we could call our own.

Anthony De Mello tells the story of a guest that brought a duck to the monastery. That night, the guest and the monks enjoyed a feast of duck. Soon, friends of the guest showed up, wanting some of the duck to eat. So they made duck soup. Then, friends of the friends showed up, also wanting some of the duck to eat.

The head of the monastery presents them with bowls of steaming hot water. “What’s this?” they say. “It is the soup of the soup of the duck that was brought by our friend.”

Likewise, De Mello says, our religious faith—that gets passed on and on and on—gets exceedingly watered down. Where are our first-hand experiences of the divine?

Our group was hoping for these. Only we didn’t have patron saints to guide us, Paul or anyone else. Instead, we had patron churches—you, the Church of the Covenant, and, your sister church in Washington, the Church of the Savior. We would use you, and your story, and your theological emphases—of call, community, and mission—to guide us.

With hopes of deepening our spirituality, strengthening our bonds of fellowship, empowering our group to do mission. Maybe even a first-hand encounter with God.

“Why us?” you ask. Why of all the churches and models that are out there, why the way you do church? When I was designing the program, I thought of what the missional theologian Allen Roxburgh said about the churches of our postmodern era. He said, “There are two kinds: one is the emotional, performance-driven church that evokes a certain kind of religious feeling in its worshippers (think the mega-church model). The other has a quieter spirituality, built upon the practice of spiritual disciplines and a deep sense of community. A disciplined way of life (think the way you do church).

I knew the model which I think has more depth: yours! Which is built on the notion of the “integrity of membership,” which means that members commit to disciplines such as daily prayer, Bible reading, worship, proportionate giving, and a mission group.

A model which is built on the notion of the inward journey of time spent apart with God, and the outward journey of service and care for the world.

Integrity of membership and the inward/outward journey. I was first introduced to the Church of the Savior my senior year of college. A classmate of mine, Mike Little, said that he was going to Washington, D.C., to live and work in the Church of the Savior.

That was a surprise to me. Mike’s nickname was Richie, in part because of the comedian Rich Little, but it was also because he was an economics major and all he cared about was making money and impressing the ladies. He went on a mission trip to India with our campus minister and a group from the college, and got all turned around. He came back, went out to Church of the Savior, and the rest, as we say, is history. He is still there with his wife, Victoria.

I learned of the Church of the Covenant through Bev Cosby. “Hey,” he asked me, “do you folks want to help out at the new Gateway/Samaritan Inn?” Or, “Hey, we’re opening Miriam’s House next week. I hope you’ll come see it.” Or “Come by the Lodge of the Fisherman and enjoy a meal with us.” I had never met anyone quite like Bev Cosby.

Who are these people, who in the name and spirit of Christ, give back so much to their communities and to the world, especially to those that others seem to have forgotten about? I knew the model which seemed best to me. It was yours.

So what the ten of us did in the fall of 2010 was to covenant together to become a spiritual growth group, that would meet for 2 ½ hours each Saturday, for five Saturdays, and also come on a retreat here to the Church of the Covenant. There were three men and seven women ... ranging in age from 19 to 93. (I just did the 19 year olds wedding this past Friday. She’s 22 now). All members of Gordon Street Christian Church, except one, whose a member of another congregation, but participates in our weekly Bible study.

We covenanted together as a group to meet, to learn, to pray and worship together—all with the hopes of deepening our spirituality. The members committed to disciplines of daily prayer and Bible study; they committed to reading a packet of material which contained some of your favorite authors (Henri Nouwen, Jean Vanier, Richard Rohr, and others).

We came together each week and had a centering time, discussions about our readings, group exercises around prayer or community or mission (whatever the topic was), and we closed in worship. You get the picture. And towards the end of our time, we came here to the Church of the Covenant, for a retreat that involved silence and worship and conversations with some of your members: Dolly and Will, Bert, Hope, Sandy, and David. It was a wonderful capstone to our experience as a group!

Our members were awed by what they saw in you. The deep bonds in your community; the level at which you pursue the spiritual life; the missions that have grown out of this community (we spent an afternoon visiting the L'Arche homes). One of our members—the 93 year old lady—described you as “monk-like,” and she cautioned, “little groups can be weird” (take that as a compliment). But then, she said, “But it was like a piece of heaven. I felt God there.”

I think we all did. We would have good discussions about whether or not we preferred a traditional church or something different like this one, but everyone, I think, was awed by what we found here. You truly are what I think Bev and Gordon envisioned their churches to be: a testament to the wider church regarding what radical faithfulness to the gospel looks like.

I don't have time to go into all the dimensions of the project. I have given a copy to your church if you wish to read it. You can read about our experiences with centering prayer and *lectio divina* and what kind of callings people discerned. You can look at the data collected and the conclusions reached. It's all there—carefully scrutinized and ultimately passed by my readers at the seminary.

But remember our lofty goal? To have first-hand experiences of the divine? A few of those experiences happened, even though the ways of God are too free and mysterious, to speak in cause and effect language. One told of a light during centering prayer; another of an

extraordinary dream he had; still another of an experience of being cleansed by God's grace and being asked by God to teach her women's circle, something she had really not wanted to do.

That was Margaret. She did it, with her tough and committed spirit. She did it. Four months later, during Holy Week, she died unexpectedly during the night. Her funeral on Good Friday.

There were four of those extraordinary, mystical kinds of experiences—which I suppose it is normal for the human spirit to yearn for, and God, in grace, sometimes gives us them. But most of our time was spent in the realm of the ordinary—working on spiritual disciplines, working together as a group, just trying to “press on, strain forward” (to use Paul's words) in the spiritual journey. Most of our time was on level ground, not on the mountaintop.

In that regard, I think of Teresa of Avila as our patron saint, if we had claimed one? Remember her? The early years of feeling God's consoling presence, but then an 18 year period of spiritual dryness. But Teresa never gave up her daily life of prayer. Finally, something awakened in Teresa's consciousness: an awareness of something else coming into the picture, an experience of God's grace, which, she said, freed her from the limits of her culture and family history, and called her into a “strong determination to please God in everything.” Those disciplines—Teresa would say—practiced for those long 18 years, laid the groundwork for intimacy.

Speaking for our group, I think that's what we learned through our program. Nothing can replace the disciplines, nothing can define our responsibility any better. And, if a shaft of light comes your way, to God be the glory. Receive it, enjoy it, and then get back to work.

Press on, strain forward, Church of the Covenant, in your work here. In your witness to the wider church; in your mission to this world. We need your voice. You might even consider ... well, think about it? Taking the name of Paul. Amen.