

September 29, 2013

What does a life of faith actually look like? As Christians we are called to this but it would be nice to have some contemporary models to guide us.

1 Timothy 6: 11-15

This passage calls us to stick to our faith even when it means paddling against the current of our culture. It is addressed to the leaders of the early church reminding them of the spiritual power they possess in the eyes of the community and the need to use that power to unite, rather than divide, the community. As we hear these words of Paul, can you think of someone in our time whose calling to serve Christ is clear and courageous enough to go against the flow?

¹¹But you, Timothy, man of God: Run for your life from all this. Pursue a righteous life—a life of wonder, faith, love, steadiness, courtesy. ¹²Run hard and fast in the faith. Seize the eternal life, the life you were called to, the life you so fervently embraced in the presence of so many witnesses.

¹³I'm charging you before the life-giving God and before Christ, who took his stand before Pontius Pilate and didn't give an inch: ¹⁴Keep this command to the letter, and don't slack off. Our Master, Jesus Christ, is on his way. ¹⁵He'll show up right on time, his arrival guaranteed by the Blessed and Undisputed Ruler, High King, High God.

Luke 16: 19-31

This passage is one of the parables, teaching stories, of Jesus. It was probably addressed to the Sadducees. This was a group of ultra-conservative religious leaders in the 1st century. They were powerful and usually very wealthy. They were not popular among common folk. One of the features of the beliefs of the Sadducees is that they rejected the notion of life after death. For Jesus, this is an opportunity to reflect on the relationship of our conduct of faith now and its potential impact in the future. Listen to these words of challenge.

¹⁹There once was a rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption. ²⁰A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, had been dumped on his doorstep. ²¹All he lived for was to get a meal from scraps off the rich man's table. His best friends were the dogs who came and licked his sores.

²²Then he died, this poor man, and was taken up by the angels to the lap of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In hell and in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham in the distance and Lazarus in his lap. ²⁴He called out, 'Father Abraham, mercy! Have mercy! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool my tongue. I'm in agony in this fire.'

²⁵But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It's not like that here. Here he's consoled and you're tormented. ²⁶Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that

no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross over from you to us.'

²⁷"The rich man said, 'Then let me ask you, Father: Send him to the house of my father ²⁸where I have five brothers, so he can tell them the score and warn them so they won't end up here in this place of torment.'

²⁹"Abraham answered, 'They have Moses and the Prophets to tell them the score. Let them listen to them.'

³⁰"I know, Father Abraham,' he said, 'but they're not listening. If someone came back to them from the dead, they would change their ways.'

³¹"Abraham replied, 'If they won't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they're not going to be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.'"

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – "Being a Christian"

I have a very clear bias about the message from the scripture readings today.

You will be delighted to know that this will not be a sermon about money or stewardship... so you can all relax!

I agree with French Biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias who argued that the parable in Luke should be called the parable of the six brothers (Rediscovering the Parables p.147)

The message is not about wealth and poverty as is usually the interpretation => the key is to see that the story is about listening and learning from scripture, from the prophets, from Jesus and other faithful folk.

The message is about paying attention to people who are living faithfully and living according to what they purport to believe and for us to be open to embracing their example.

Al Forrest, late editor of UCC Observer wrote about this parable (The Parables of Jesus)

For him, the issue was not that the man was rich but what he allowed his wealth to do for him was to rob him of his humanity -> wealth/power allowed him to lose his soul => tragic consequences.

If you believe it has to be visible in the way you live.

This is what Paul is getting at in his letter to Timothy, it is a reminder that people look up to leaders => they must be aware of the spiritual power they hold to influence the faithful living of others.

The power of your position must not pull you away from the needs and vulnerabilities of your followers.

As I read these two passages I kept returning to the bits of news I've been hearing about one person, Pope Francis.

When he was elected in early March and made his appearance on the Papal balcony of St. Peters he broke custom:

Instead of blessing the crowd he said: "I ask a favour of you... pray for me."

At his first dinner with the cardinals who elected him he joked: "May God forgive you."

Rather than living in the palatial papal apartment he has chosen to remain in the Vatican Hotel, a kind of Best Western for priests and bishops, choosing this, he quipped "for his psychiatric health."

More seriously he said he needed to live among people, have breakfast daily with other guests.

He announced that he would not be leaving Rome in the summer for the Papal retreat at Castel Gandolfo with its lush gardens, lake and utter solitude.

He speaks spontaneously to children, goes off-script when he preaches or gives speeches AND he dives into crowds to talk to regular people.

He has appointed someone close to him to oversee the management of the scandal-filled Vatican Bank => rocking that boat => stripping secrecy from its operation.

He rides in a minibus instead of a limo.

He wears a plain cross, refuses papal jewels, travels in elevators with other people.

He has washed the feet of women and men, Muslims and Catholics.

He blessed Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

He has suggested that God forgive those who follow their conscience – including atheists!!

He has declared that it is time to get unstuck from the focus on abortion, homosexuality and women's ordination.

... all of this to the shock of some, the delight of many and the surprise of most.

Francis is, as a recent MacLean's article noted, in "a process of demystifying the office"

He is radically re-writing his position with "the asceticism, the indifference to rank and the perks of office, the dedication to service and to the Roman Catholic Church as the church of the poor." (MacLeans 28/06/13)

Can you hear the voice of Jesus in the parable? or the stern advice of Paul to Timothy?

We have a Pope who embodies modesty – is not afraid to apologize – who believes that God's mercy is without limits and so should his!!!

He is building his papacy on relationships – on restoring trust – on expressing love and acceptance.

He has opened dialogues that could have been unthinkable before his election.

He looks at the world with eyes wide open and seeks ways to address the inequities and injustices.

He shocked the world when he stated: "I said that if a homosexual person is of good will and is in search of God, I am no one to judge."

I believe we are witnessing one of the greatest Christian leaders in a very long time.

A person who is willing to lead from the base of humanity not from some secluded pinnacle.

A person who proclaims the saving love of God in Jesus and doesn't have an asterisk next to it defining who is excluded.

This is radical faith, courageous faith, healing faith => a person the six brothers would do well to pay attention to.