27th Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Cycle C, 10.2.16  
Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; 2 Timothy 1:6-8;  
Luke 17:5-10  

REBUILDING THE HOUSE THAT HAS FALLEN INTO RUIN

St. Francis Assisi is one of the most renowned saints in the history of Christianity. He may have been canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, but he is loved as a hero and saint by people of every faith and walk of life. Tuesday is his Feast Day, and as I was preparing for our weekend worship, it seemed to me a shame to overlook the life and influence of this beautiful man, Francis -- who once called himself and his friars the “troubadours of the Lord.” His life touches not only ordinary people, but also those guiding spirits of each era. St. Francis has been a hero for cardinals and hippies, environmentalists, artists, gardeners and children, peacemakers and poets. Pope Francis himself took the name “Francis” – the first pope ever to do so – because he wanted to walk in the spirit of the humble man of Assisi. Just as Francis of Assisi offered a different model of “being Church” to the people of the Middle Ages, so Pope Francis proposes a new paradigm for the Church today – a humble Church that encounters people and listens to them; a simple Church that has a heart for the poor; a joyful Church that affirms rather than condemns. After reading today’s scriptures in light of St. Francis’ life and spirit, I think that the Word of God is richly enhanced by examining some of the contributions and insights of this humble beloved of God who called the moon his sister and the sun his brother.

The prophet Habakkuk cries out in the first reading: Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery? Destruction and violence are before me. One day as Francis was praying before the crucifix in the tumbledown chapel of San Damiano near Assisi, he heard the voice of Christ tell him three times: “Francis, rebuild my house which you see is falling into ruins.” Thinking that the Lord meant for him to repair the chapel, he began a renovation project. Soon he realized that his larger mission was the renewal of the entire Church -- the hearts of people, not the bricks of a building. He became one of the greatest reformers in the history of the church, not accusing with arrogance or cynicism, but joyfully encouraging young and old, rich and poor, to follow more closely the message of Christ in the gospel.

Just as the Lord responded to the prophet Habakkuk and gave him a vision of how life can be, a vision which presses on to fulfillment, so Francis had a vision of what the Church could be if people heard the voice of the Lord calling them to follow him, felt the warmth of God’s love satisfying their deepest hungers, and entered into communion with all people and all of creation.

Francis renewed the Church by first renewing himself. The son of a wealthy merchant family, he was a young man on his way to fight with the papal army when a message from God told him to return to Assisi until he received further word. Confused but trusting God, he returned home and experienced one of the worst periods of his life. Scorned by his family, mocked by his friends, he was torn by self-doubt. In the dark caves along Mount Subiaco, he spent great amounts of time wrestling with himself. He confronted questions of who he was (not the “noble” he had vainly tried to become), his relationships with other people (not as the leader of a pleasure-seeking gang he had earlier manipulated with his money) and his relationship with God (not the superficial bond he had known up to this time). Being “in the caves” gave him time to sort out his life and values. It taught him the meaning of
true prayer. It showed him that the basis for any change outside oneself has to begin **inside oneself** -- by aligning ourselves with the Spirit of Christ. Only when we enter that cave of darkness where God can transform us, and struggle with our own hearts, can we emerge with a vision that will renew us and our world.

Secondly, Francis renewed the Church by creating **caring communities**. I vividly recall the tenderness and generous spirit of the Franciscans who helped out at Sunday Mass in my parish when I was a child. Their kindness toward everyone reflected the type of church community that Francis envisioned. When the Lord sent men to follow Francis, he called them “the Order of Little Brothers.” It was his intention that this new order would not be weighed down with bureaucratic structures but would be an open community of men who believed in genuine brotherhood -- a bold stroke on Francis’ part during a time when jealousy and discord -- even within the Church -- was rampant. This ideal of a loving community based on personalism and reverence for each human being caught on like wildfire. Within a few years the Franciscan family of both men and women numbered in the thousands and spread throughout Europe. To a 13th-century Church grown cold, too official and officious, Francis restored the concept of a caring community -- in the spirit of Jesus and the apostles.

Today we still need a good dose of St. Francis’ sense of community and simplicity of lifestyle. If we are to rebuild the Church, we need again to see one another and all people as our brothers and sisters. Our parish churches can’t be places where people remain anonymous and refuse to acknowledge each other. They need to be the kind of community that you are -- considerate and supportive of one another. The Church today, which lost so many members in the past fifty years, will attract people once again not by the kind of doctrine we teach, but by the kind of community we are. When people see that we gather together in worship, not because we are obligated by Church law, or because it satisfies a desire for private devotion, but because we are delighted to be with one another in God’s presence, then will the Church regain its appeal and reflect the joy of St. Francis and the happiness that union with Christ is meant to bring.

Finally, the renewal of the Church that Francis brought about in his day was based on a spirit of **selfless giving**. Francis epitomized the challenge of today’s gospel: *When you have done all you have been commanded to do, say: ‘We are merely servants. We have done no more than our duty.’* The story is told that one day while he was riding along the road on his horse, Francis was about to bypass a leper. Suddenly, moved by Christ’s challenge of total love, he stopped, dismounted, and then embraced and kissed the disfigured, putrid-smelling man. He believed in the human dignity of every person and extended
himself on behalf of the suffering and outcast of his time. If Francis were alive today, he would urge the church -- all of us -- to have a great sensitivity to those discriminated against because of nationality, race, religious beliefs or sexual orientation. The homeless and the poor would be his special concern. Francis would have the Church fight for the human rights of those oppressed. He would strive to change the social structures that keep the poor and all of today’s “lepers” in bondage. All this he would do untiringly and then say: “I’m merely a servant. I’ve done no more than my duty.”

All this he did with a song in his heart and a smile on his face. He contradicts any notion that faith or religion is meant to be burdensome or distasteful. In a world overwhelmed by the violence and terror, the “vision” of joy and optimism which Assisi represents seems terribly delayed. Yet Christ assures us that, with faith even the size of a mustard seed, you and I can be transformed and can help to change our world. St. Francis Assisi’s life and example urges you and me -- our Church and our world -- on that road to ongoing renewal.

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