

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2005

Text: Romans 1:16-17; 3:19-28

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Pr. James DeLange served as St. Francis' senior pastor from 1982-1999. – Ed.

You probably have your favorite place where you stop to get coffee and maybe a little breakfast on the way to work in the morning. Even though I don't go into work anymore, I still go to my favorite place at least once a week. It's The Cove on Castro Street. I have always liked it because the food is good, the price is right and I often run into people from the neighborhood or from church. For many years they have had a very large display of photos of people from the neighborhood, many of whom died of AIDS at the height of the epidemic, including a couple of departed members of St. Francis. When you went in to sit down, it made you feel like these folks were greeting you.

But a few months ago, one of the owners bought out the other owner and since then things have changed. First the photos came down and the walls were painted an obviously carefully chosen color. Then they put some art deco sconces on the walls and big vases on the half wall in the middle of the cafe into which they have placed huge bouquets of flowers. And they have started playing music. Some of it is ok, but Edith Piaf at 8:30 in the morning? I don't like the changes. So I don't know if I will be as regular as I have been. I might be looking for a new favorite coffee shop.

My trivial experience with change tells something about us human beings - about the difficulty we have in dealing with change in our lives. And it informs us about how difficult it has been for us and the other citizens of this planet to deal with the tremendous changes of the past few decades. These changes have not only been confusing, they have produced a reaction of rage and sometimes that rage has exploded in violence - as we have seen among people who do so in the name of Christ and as we witness in the culture of terrorism that has gripped the minds of some in the Muslim world. How do we deal with all this? Not only in others, but in ourselves?

When St. Paul says the Gospel is the "power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" what possible application could that have in dealing with the tremendous changes we are forced to deal with in this increasingly global community? For we are not only seeing the globalization of the economy and the environment and terror, but the globalization of everything - including theology - which I am reminded regularly in my work with the San Francisco Interfaith Council.

My Christian faith tells me that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not only solace for a confused, anxious and overwhelmed people, it is the foundation for the life of

every Christian, no matter what other forces may be pulling at us. A study of the Bible, particularly the Four Gospels, also tells me the Gospel is to be the agent of change in history because the old creation has passed away and in Christ there is a new creation, which means every Christian is called - as my Jewish friends remind themselves – to be a repairer of the world. And so I am proud to say to anyone who asks:

(If I may paraphrase St. Paul), “I am not embarrassed to say I believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and I see no need to apologize for it. Because I have seen its power to rescue and repair individuals and whole communities from the destructive powers at work in the world in all of their guises.”

But having said that, I have to do more than recite the Lutheran version of the Christian pledge. I have to do the hard work of connecting the Gospel to the personal and global changes I am forced to face every day. Maybe a look at history will help us do that.

Many of us know the story of Martin Luther but it is worth repeating, especially on this Reformation Sunday. At the turn of the millennium five years ago, Time magazine surveyed historians and other scholars to ask the question, “Who were the 100 most influential people of the last 1,000 years?” Albert Einstein came in first, Martin Luther came in third. So we ought to know his story and why he was such a significant figure in the development of Western thought and life.

Exactly 500 years ago this summer, a 21 year-old law student named Martin Luther was walking down a forest path in a thunderstorm and was struck by lightning. Interpreting this as the wrath of God, in fear for his soul, he entered a monastery. There he began a struggle for the forgiveness of his sins, trying to extract approval from what he had been taught was a judging and wrathful God. In this, Luther was not unlike his medieval contemporaries, except he took it more seriously. Far more seriously. And, like his contemporaries, he believed that the Roman Catholic Church with its sacraments and claims to be the representative of Christ on earth had the power to grant forgiveness – approval before God and thus peace of mind and a peaceful life in the hereafter. But as he studied the Bible in preparation for teaching theology, he came across this text in Romans:

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of salvation to everyone who has faith.”

Luther grew up believing that the supply of God's forgiveness was limited, but discovered that there was more forgiveness in God than there was sin in him. Furthermore, forgiveness is a **gift** from God, discovered Luther, not something you earn. It is **God's** grace that makes you a righteous person and you appropriate this grace by faith alone, not by trying to obey ten commandments or going through rituals or proving yourself worthy to the tribunal of the church. Soon this good news had spread all across Europe and the Western Church was deeply divided.

Was the Church the power of God on earth or was the Gospel the power of God on earth? If it wasn't the church, then the rationale for its claims to power over territory, the arts, science, morality and everything else was undermined. No wonder Europe was embroiled in war for the next 140 years. The Reformation gave birth to a whole revolution in the way people thought of themselves, their world and their place in it.

People felt free.

Well, as we said: For Luther and his generation, the most important issue in life was how can I find peace with a judging and wrathful God?

Not the issue for the vast majority of Americans today where Uncle God is just the nicest person you would ever want to visit. Even though after awhile you get bored with his stories. And even if you would prefer to visit Aunt God rather than Uncle God, the stories are the same. But if you tune out the stories and let your imagination take over, you can have the God of your desire. Just the nicest person you would ever want to meet. If you look at the Spirituality section at Barnes & Noble, you see dozens of books that build on this theme. There is a Platonic theme to all the books - to transcend the world and fly away - spiritual escapes to some peaceful place because the world is so difficult. Of course the world is a painful place to live. It has always been. But how does transcending the world help you live in that world? We can't avoid it. So let's take a look an honest look at the world in which we find ourselves. Then maybe we can figure out a way to repair it.

If we were to fast forward through the economic, political, social and religious movements in the Western world over the 500 years since Luther, many of them birthed in the church - The Enlightenment, the rise of Pietism, the abolition of slavery, the rise of modernism - to the decades after WWII where all of us in this room came of age, we see a pattern: The increase in the sharing of information and ever expanding technology. This expansion of information has allowed more and more people to participate in the world of ideas and the world of causes. It has also allowed for the dissemination of bad ideas and put an ever-increasing burden on individuals to make difficult choices, or, be unwilling to make any choice at all - which is in fact a choice.

And for this present generation the onslaught of information and the array of choices often feel like our heads are bouncing off the walls. Between 1965 and 1975, the tune of the American nation had changed. From the shock sensation of the Beatles, the Grateful Dead, and the Doors to the heated political activism of Viet Nam, Civil Rights, and the beginnings of Gay Pride and Feminism - suddenly nothing was the same. And as we look back, we have to embrace what that decade had to say about Viet Nam, Civil rights, Gay Pride and Feminism. But not everything in that decade was good. Questioning settled answers on war and civil rights meant to some that everything was up for grabs. They sought to

deconstruct history and science and literature and rebuild it according to a new paradigm. What about the villains in their midst who agreed with them? Create a victimized past thereby explaining their bad behavior. So terrorists and rioters and people who cheat the system and kill police and their neighbors are just the victims of an oppressive society. And religion? Organized religion is a major source of oppression and is to be avoided and marginalized. Does any of this sound familiar?

The 60's were born in San Francisco. And ever since, San Francisco has represented to the world everything that was wrong with the 60's - and everything that was right - depending on one's point of view. And, if we were to take a survey, it is probably the latter view that was the motivation for many of us moving here.

And like social upheavals of the past, there was a terrible downside that the leaders of the movement failed to criticize. In Joan Didion's classic book, "Slouching Toward Bethlehem", she gives a riveting account of the culture of drugs, chaos and degradation she observed in the Haight Ashbury during that period – all in the name of freedom, peace and love. As a pastor at that time, besides revising liturgies to accommodate guitars, some of my colleagues made efforts to reach out to this disaffected generation. One pastor decided to distribute quilts to a commune in Colorado and try to establish a rapport with its young residents. He reported how he saw toddlers running free wearing dirty diapers, with rashes and hunger while their youthful parents, high on drugs, were dancing to the songs of freedom, peace and love. Meantime, some of the supposedly intellectual rhetoric of that time bordered on the absurd. I remember a conference I attended where a college professor in a lecture said that we should listen to the ravings of people who were insane to find new insights into truth. Another said the person sitting in a corner for hours ripping curtains because she liked to hear them rip was to be seen as an artist, expressing herself, as did Picasso.

These were the extremes. But the leaders of the movement failed to criticize them.

As Andrew Sullivan wrote in an essay in Time Magazine two years ago: "In some ways, the culture wars in this country for the past thirty years have been about that decade from 1965 to 1975. The political, sexual and cultural revolution of that decade symbolizes for one side all that has gone wrong with America, and for the other, much that has gone right. We have lurched back and forth in reaction to this - with the multiculti left on one side and the religious right on the other, and the rest of the people uncomfortably in between, longing for some kind of synthesis, some way out and forward." (Andrew Sullivan, Time 10/20/03)

Little wonder that some young people who were against the war and supportive of civil rights and free speech saw the excesses and wanted to turn back the clock. One of those was a young priest named Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. Another was Richard Viguerre, one of the architects of the neo-conservative movement and founder of several conservative think tanks and organizations that today form the core ideology of the conservative movement within the Republican Party. In a rare interview on CSPAN a few months ago, Mr. Viguerre was asked about his religious faith. "My wife and six children were devout Roman Catholics. As were my parents and my wife's parents. In the late 60's we belonged to a parish in Washington, D.C. Every week we went to mass we were handed a loose-leaf notebook with a new chopped up version of the mass accompanied by guitars. Then it sounded like they were making Martin Luther out to be a saint. We had had enough. We left the Catholic Church and joined the Orthodox Church." Even though it had been 35 years, you could still see and hear the anger and resentment.

Dissatisfaction with politics and the direction of our culture has made many people feel powerless. Lots of folks just try to live under its radar, hoping to avoid any direct contact with it. Right wing commentators like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Brien have tapped into that dissatisfaction, blaming all the problems of our time on "the effete left wing liberals in government, the universities and the media." To listen to them, you don't have to do the work of democracy - compromise, seeking consensus, making decisions based on rational argument - you just have to put the right guy in charge and let him run things. Then all I have to do is cheer his victories and boo his opponents. In political science theory, that is called fascism.

When the going gets tough, the weirdo's turn pro.

In the face of these competing forces and the rage that accompanies them, we ask again, "How is the Gospel of Jesus Christ even relevant to all this?"

First of all, the message of the resurrection says that Jesus is here to stay. He is alive and well in those who believe in him. We weren't taken away to heaven in the hour we first believed. We are here, living in forgiveness as people who know who we are and what we are to do. Men and women, gay and straight, transgendered and queer, black and white, we are all one in Christ and in this faith together and in Christ's work together.

Secondly, the pulse of Christian faith is not fixed, but rather taken daily, existentially and from various vantage points. Luther said we should drown the old Adam in our baptism daily, that a new Adam - a new human being - might daily arise to do God's work and do it free of fear, for "God's perfect love casts out fear" to quote St. John. This enables us to take chances even if that means we sin boldly in trying to do God's work. We are to engage the world around us and, like Jesus, repair it where we see it broken.

This does not mean we go at things with a feeling of righteousness. We human beings who claim faith in Jesus Christ are at one and the same time saints and sinners. This is one of the linchpins of Lutheran theology. This distinguishes us from the so-called evangelicals who claim that the transforming power of the Gospel results in a total rebirth. According to them, no longer is a believer at one and the same time a saint and sinner, but a whole new person – born again – who is guided by God and can do no wrong. Which explains some of their blind allegiance to born again ministers and politicians. And should they do wrong, then they say they were never born again in the first place. Lutherans are never surprised when Christians do bad things. We are never surprised when Christians do good things either. Both are to be expected. We cannot escape the reality that we are at one and the same time human and godly. And so is everyone else.

And we have been given by Jesus a vision of how the world should be. “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news preached to them.” (Matthew 11:4-5).

In other words, the world is to be repaired where it is broken. That was Jesus’ calling and it is ours.

One month from now we will be receiving a new pastor at St. Francis. This change will not be revolutionary, but it will be a change. I expect our human natures will be fully engaged in adjusting to this change. And I expect our godly natures will as well. As will the human and godly natures of Pastor Goldstein.

We at St. Francis and in Christian communities all across this world have to be careful that we don’t live a brand of religion that is drained of authentic Christian faith, a religion in which ritual, community life and political correctness serve as a cover for theological nakedness.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of salvation, there is not some other gospel, says St. Paul. Christ’s light shines in the darkness, writes John the Evangelist. Whether it is the light that comes to us through God’s imperfect pastors or the light that shines in our hearts from lightning on a forest path, it is always a reflection of God’s and not human light. Indeed, any true light that we humans might have will always be, like the moon’s, a reflected light.

So as Jesus said to his followers at the empty tomb, “Don’t be afraid.” Go. Engage the world. Both embrace change and challenge change. And let that light shine.
Amen.