

“Decluttering for Love”

Friday I was in the bank in line behind a young guy depositing his paycheck. I was impressed because he was depositing most of it into savings and the smaller part into his checking. As he talked with the teller I learned that he worked laying asphalt. At that point I noticed how dark his tan was, which reminded me of myself when I worked outdoors in the summers for my father. Also his hair was cropped short to keep his head cool. I also noticed his boots and jeans. The fronts of them were covered in black tar. That was his work uniform which was very different from the teller in her dress with nicely coiffed hair, makeup, and painted nails.

There is a comedian, Tom Papa, that makes me howl with his observations about our daily lives. He has a routine about all of the preparations we go through just to leave the house. He says it is like we are our own pet with all of the brushing, wiping, combing, cleaning that we have to do. He notes that we have this personal care list running through our heads all of the time. We ask ourselves “Do I have my keys, my wallet and my phone?” as we pat ourselves down to make sure everything is in its place. He says that the only thing that differentiates a normal person from one who has lost it, is that the one who has lost it is saying it out loud as he walks down a busy sidewalk. “Got me keys, got my wallet, got my phone, it’s gonna be a good day.”

Being one of the disciples of Jesus seems to be quite different. It is not so much what he might forget than what he is not supposed to carry. In this passage from Luke Jesus sends out thirty-five pairs of disciples to enter the towns he plans to visit along his way to Jerusalem. They might be the like the advance teams that politicians send out to the towns they are going to visit to make sure all is ready. The important difference is that Jesus’ advance teams are also there to preach, teach, and work miracles; a significant step above the work of political advance teams.

Another difference is that the political advance teams have many tools they work with not the least of which are cellphones, laptops, professional clothing, lists of local people to prepare, maps of the route the politician will take and places to be visited, places that might require extra security, and much, much more.

One might think that when Jesus sends his thirty-five pairs of disciples ahead of him he might give them some similar tools. Instead, what he does is gives them instructions on what not to take. He tells them to “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.” There is traveling light, but this is extreme. They have no extra clothing or shoes. They have no money or food. They just have the clothes upon their backs. It seems that instead of being readied for the journey he is purposefully sending them out unprepared, “like lambs into the midst of wolves.”

When they get to a town that they have been assigned whatever house they enter they are to offer them peace. If the peace is returned they should stay in that house during their entire visit. They are not networking they are building a base in one home and with one family. If they are not welcomed they are to wipe the dust of the town off of their sandals and move on. But whether they are accepted or not they are to proclaim, “know this: that the kingdom of God has come near.”

Possibly the most beloved of Christian saints took this as his model for spreading the Good News of Christ in Italy during the early 13th century. When St. Francis of Assisi was organizing his first followers into what would become the

Franciscans he opened the Bible at random several times to seek divine guidance. One of the passages he landed on was this one. He took it as a sign that his brothers and he should travel in a similar fashion. Thus the Franciscans were originally a mendicant order. That is they moved from town to town carrying nothing but the clothes they wore. They begged their food and lodging. When they could not find any they went without. They were not to have monasteries, libraries, or any communal possessions. While they did have a chapel in the forest. It was one that had been abandoned by others and that they had restored.

St. Francis felt that he was called to live as the most ancient of Jesus' followers lived. It would not be an easy life, but if that was how his Lord had lived then that would be how he and his brothers would live. St. Paul hints at this way of life when he writes, "for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit."

Twenty-first century people find the concept of self-denial preposterous. We ignore it in favor of fulfilling our wants at every turn. Our consumer society is the antithesis of St. Francis and Jesus. If it were not then we would not need Weight Watchers, diet books, Marie Kondo and other decluttering gurus, slogans like "live simply so others can simply live," closet organizers, life coaches, Real Simple magazine, and the list goes on and on.

When we simplify our lives we make more space for God. For example, when we make shopping lists we are less likely to fall prey to impulse buying. When we reduce our consumption of media filled with advertising we are less vulnerable to "needs" manufactured by marketing. When we make household budgets that set aside money for the church, charities and savings we are less likely to spend our disposable income on stuff that clutters up our lives, which then requires us to hire someone to help us declutter. When we fill our time by helping others, meditation, and spiritual reading we are less likely to get bored and need to buy something to relieve the boredom.

Jesus and St. Francis among others point the way to a healthier physical and spiritual life by helping us to refocus our lives away from stuff and the accumulation of more stuff and onto the life of the soul. We would do good to remember the old saw "you can't take it with you." Indeed, the soul is all that goes with us into the next life. No matter how many possessions we have they do not fill the God-hole in our heart. But if we tidy up our lives and declutter our hearts we will be able to see the joys of life that are there for the taking and sharing. The more God we have in our lives the more we want to share it. The more we share God's joy with others the more we have of it. Remarkably the more of God's love we have in our lives the less we need possessions and the less tidying or decluttering we need. The love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord opens space within us and makes room for more love. God's love is something we can never have too much of.