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Bishop's Sermon at the 55th Annual Diocesan Convention Eucharist

St. Christopher's Church, Lubbock, Texas

October 5, 2013 - *Francis of Assisi*

Today in the life of this diocese we celebrate and remember St. Francis of Assisi, certainly one of the most admired, respected, and loved of all saints. We know of his love for creation and nature, and we celebrate the Blessing of Animals every year in early October; we decorate our homes with Nativity scenes at Christmas, a scene introduced by Francis. We take the theme of this year's convention from Francis: "Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary use words." We know his prayer: "Make me an instrument of your peace." We know he was born to a prosperous merchant, and after living the high-spirited life of a wealthy young man, he had a conversion experience, became a preacher, gained a following, and eventually founded a monastic order devoted to a life of poverty.

His call to serve the Church came as he was praying before the Crucifix in a dilapidated chapel outside the walls of Assisi. He heard the Voice: "Francis, go and rebuild my house, which is falling to ruin." After initially believing this was a call to rebuild the chapel, Francis came to understand it as a call to rebuild God's Church, which was fraught with greed and scandal. Rebuild my Church.

The passage from the Gospel chosen by the Church to read on St. Francis Day concludes with the following words from Jesus. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

These are comforting, welcoming, soothing Gospel words to all of us. Everyone here carries burdens – some carry very heavy loads. Everyone who offers daily intercessory prayers for others knows that. We can imagine how this passage is good news to those with whom Francis lived and those to whom Francis served – the poor, the outcasts, the lepers – as we know this passage speaks to all people.

A great 20th century theologian preached a memorable sermon on this passage. His name was Paul Tillich; the clergy here are familiar with Dr Tillich. Tillich begins the sermon by telling a personal story (a testimony) of his Confirmation in the Church. It was customary in his parish for every Confirmand to choose a meaningful passage from scripture, and recite it before the gathered congregation. Young Paul chose the passage: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden."

He says: "I was asked with a kind of astonishment and irony why I had chosen that particular passage. For I was living under happy conditions, and, being only 15 years old, was without any apparent labor and burden. I could not answer at that time; I felt a little embarrassed, but basically

right. And I was right, indeed; every child is right in responding immediately to those words; every adult is right in responding to them in all periods of life These words are universal, and fit every human being and every human situation.”

But later in life, the theologian (Dr. Tillich) returns to this passage, and in this memorable sermon suggests that the burden and labor from which we find rest is not the burden of work, or pain, or persecution. The promise of Jesus is not more pleasure and less pain, but actually, the Cross.

Tillich claims that the burden Jesus “wants to take from us is the burden of religion. It is the yoke of the law, imposed on the people of His time by the religious teachers ... the Scribes and Pharisees, as they are called usually.”

To those laboring under the burden of the religious laws of his time, Jesus says, “Come unto ME Take MY yoke upon you, and learn from ME; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Jesus challenges the religious leaders, the religious laws, religion itself, and invites anyone under the burden of the religion of that time and place – under that yoke of religion – to take HIS yoke: “Take my yoke upon you,” he says.

I don’t know how many times the Gospels record Jesus as challenging the religious authorities, or even religion itself, but eventually the political authorities and the religious authorities, together, decide he’s done it enough to get crucified.

More than once, he challenges them in the synagogue. On one particular occasion, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. A woman, crippled for 18 years by a bad spirit, appears. Jesus sees the woman, calls her over, and in front of the religious authorities, and right in the middle of the synagogue, he heals this woman on the Sabbath.

As the story goes, the leaders of the synagogue are deeply offended; the leader of the synagogue says, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath.” And of course, the leader of the synagogue is correct. Everyone knows what the Scriptures say: no work on the Sabbath, a day of rest. It’s a commandment from God. It’s the plain meaning of Scripture. In the eyes of the religious authorities, Jesus is challenging the doctrine of their religious tradition and the authority of Scripture – the Word of God.

I am suggesting that Jesus is challenging “religion” – at least, challenging their understanding of religion. For it appears that Jesus is choosing compassion, and mercy, and love over religion, as “religion” in this story looks petty and doctrinaire. It looks like a burden.

Two thousand years later, WE live in a place on the historical time line where religion is being challenged. Critics of religion point to all the mistakes the Church (and other traditions) have made throughout history – I’ll spare us the long litany this morning.

Yet more and more people are claiming to be “spiritual, but not religious,” as they see religion as an institution more interested in self-preservation, and power, and rules than in love. Statistics show that a growing number of people don’t want to be identified with the institution, so they are claiming this new identity: “spiritual, but not religious.”

The sociologist and author, Diana Butler-Bass, has written extensively on this cultural view of religion, and how the word “religion” has become a negative term connected to other words like institution, organization, rules, order, dogma, authority, and hierarchy.

But she goes on to remind us of the roots to the word “religion.” The word “religion” breaks down to mean “re-connect” or “re-bind.” It comes from a Latin word which implies the “re-connection of ligaments – “re-ligament.” And if we think about it, that is God’s mission: to restore, to re-unite, to re-member that which is dismembered, to restore us to union with God, one another, and to our true selves.

And we participate in God’s mission when we break down walls and barriers, when we reconcile that which is alienated, when we re-unite that which is divided by proclaiming and showing love – love that cares more about people than even our closely held doctrines, and even more – I would suggest – than the institution.

The leader of the synagogue tells the woman crippled by a bad spirit: “Come on those [other] six days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath.”

Jesus says: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

It’s not a choice between religion and love. True religion is love. Love re-connects. Love re-binds. Love re-ligaments the members of the Body. Love rebuilds. Love heals on the Sabbath. Love says, “Come to me. Take my yoke upon you. Find rest for your souls.”

Jesus invites ALL to come to Him. And we know we are called to spread that message – to issue that invitation to all people; to be instruments of His peace. We pray with Francis that “where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.” All true.

But for this moment, for this present moment, as we come to God’s Altar, perhaps these words are spoken directly to you and to me. Perhaps in this moment they are meant however we hear them – however we need to hear them right now. Close your eyes. Take a breath. Jesus invites you and me: “Come to me Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”