



Called to Serve

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I thought I would begin by reiterating our Franciscan Spirituality, which is always a movement downward, a movement to littleness, to serving the other. As a Scripture person, I could have mentioned John's Gospel (13:5), where during the foot washing Jesus defines the true basis of Christianity as love & service (notice John does not mention the breaking of the bread, his important recollection is of service). Or from Luke (22), where we learn if we would be great we need to become the servant of all. But my thoughts drifted to a more theatrical, but visual, scene in "*Brother Sun, Sister Moon*," where Francis and the newly formed band of brothers are washing and feeding the lepers near Assisi. Becoming little by serving the poorest of the poor, extending ourselves to the other is the basis of our vocation. Jesus, much to our chagrin, just turns society on its head and defines true greatness, which is always found in serving without thought of reward. Jesus defines Truth as a Person (Himself) and, as a person, it is based on our actions and experiences of loving and helping, not on any set or ideas or mental exercises. Contemplation to Action = Gospel to Life.

So, over the years, where did we lose our spiritual way, replacing the wisdom and teaching of Jesus with society's relativistic norms and definitions? I can only speak for myself in saying I believe that we want a vibrant simplicity to calm our souls and a generous portion of earned comfort for our weary workaholic bodies. Basically, we want the best of both worlds and, in serving 2 masters, we are mediocre for both. Years ago I was blessed to meet John Powell, SJ at a conference in Germany and this quote from him has always stuck with me, "*The Gospel is not meant to comfort the afflicted, but to afflict the comfortable. So if you listen to the Gospel, [especially as preached in America] and feel comforted, you haven't heard the Gospel.*" We hear only that which affirms us and our way of life. Put into today's perspective, the more we seek the comfort of things, environments, our space, our activities or our retirements, the more we cease going from Gospel to life and life to Gospel and we cease embracing the radical Franciscan (Gospel) way of life. If Jesus came to upset the order of things, by choosing service to others, and Francis' goal was to follow in Jesus example, I can't see how we can get off the hook if we profess to follow them both!

Take, for example, how we often argue or condemn our own sisters and brothers over words and ideas and sometimes belief, [we are trained in this type

of dualistic thought]. You can pick any 2 sides of a discussion in any field: religion, politics, economy, etc. The battle is joined and, in battle, one must win, though in reality, generally, both sides lose by not seeing correctly and being able to affirm the validity of parts of both sides. Jesus doesn't reject this type of discourse or life because as the Beloved Son he has an edge, but because he contemplated the goodness of God. He learned to truly see, that God's graciousness (grace and mercy) embraces all creation, always, without reservation or limit. God's love is not based on "correct" doctrine or a winning argument. Francis also intuited this and, hence, spent time in the same form of contemplation. Teaching people how to see in this way is perhaps the greatest loss to our formation programs, enabling people to reach true spiritual transformation. We have gone down the road of babbling many words rather than true sight and transformation. Transformation reveals both the true self and our true giftedness.

In our dualistic thinking (right/wrong, or win/lose) we fall into the trap. There has to be a winner and a loser, a doing and a be-er. We prefer to be Martha types, doing doing doing, when Jesus constantly asks and encourages to see with a new set of eyes (the eyes of contemplation) where we can, finally, understand that Mary, indeed, has the better portion. These eyes, the eyes of Jesus, give us a healthy approach to all facets of Life, where we can finally allow God out of the box and God to be God.

It's remarkable that Jesus reveals a God who is OK with doubt and ambiguity and is very comfortable in letting the mystery be mystery, while we seem to desire a rigid structure of rights and wrongs. This God lavishes us with gifts and constantly refills us when we share them with others.

Our giftedness is not based on what we earn or accomplish, but on the goodness of the true source, which is God, and our willingness to share them with each other. Our gifts are only gifts when we use them to enrich each other, so all may have abundant life. Yes, it does require us extending ourselves beyond the confines of any religion, order, society, or group, because we professed to observe the Gospel and the Gospel goes beyond any church, society or set of ideas. Please accept the fact, every one of us is both unique and is gift to be placed at the service of all. That is Jesus' way, that is Francis' way.

The witness of both Jesus and Francis make the path very clear, service is very nature of our Order's life; its health, vitality and its ability to be good news for all depends on all of us answering our call to serve. All are gifted and loved and esteemed, but will all say "YES?" Be at peace and remember to love and serve!