Passion Sunday

The Passion is at the core of our faith. The disciples told and retold the story of the Passion before a Gospel was ever written. As each of the evangelists wrote, the Passion held pride of place. But where is the Gospel Joy to be found in this a tragic account?

Doesn’t Passion Sunday rule out joy, at least until Easter?

I believe Pope Francis would say no. And I am certain Saint Francis would agree 100%! St. Francis cherished the Passion of Christ, meditated on it often, identify with Christ to such a degree that toward the end of his life he bore the stigmata. Yet if ever there was a saint of joy, St. Francis is the man. He found joy in identifying with Christ in every way Christ showed love; caring for the sick, speaking of forgiveness, loving the poor, even offering his life for others.

One episode in the life of St. Francis and his brothers opens up why St. Francis is sometimes called the Mirror of Christ. For me, the story shocks me into getting what self-emptying really means.

One of the wealthy men of Assisi who chose to leave the world behind and join Francis was Brother Ruffino. Apparently before his conversion, Ruffino was a very important citizen, who was also described as one of the best dressed men of Assisi. But that just hid how timid and shy he really was. Behind the flashy exterior was a quiet man who always felt inadequate around others. So once Brother Ruffino joined the community, he tended to spend much of his time in solitude and prayer.

Now ordinarily, the brothers took turns in preaching. So the day came when Francis asked Brother Ruffino to take a turn, and go to the Cathedral to preach. No surprise, Brother Ruffino panicked, and begged Francis to reconsider. “Please father, I stammer, and don’t have the gift of preaching. Please send someone else. I feel so naked when I am in front of people. I feel like they are all condemning me. It is only when I am alone in contemplation that I feel safe from the eyes of others judging me. Though naked before God, I know God clothes me with his love.”

Francis was touched, and almost let Ruffino off the hook, but he realized this could be a real turning point for this quiet brother, who was so often paralyzed by fear. Francis so wanted him to experience union with the crucified Lord, that path to true freedom and the joy of the Gospel. So Francis said, “I want you to go to the Cathedral and preach the simple message of the Gospel. But because you didn’t obey immediately, take off your mantle and habit, then go preach to the people. You were naked in the Cathedral on the day of your baptism. Walk to the Cathedral and preach naked before the people, but without shame.”

Ruffino was shocked, but did as he was told. He walked through town shedding his clothes, while people laughed and jeered at him. When he got to the cathedral and climbed into the pulpit, there was an uproar of laughter. People jeered, saying to one another, “This friar must have done too much fasting and penance. He’s lost his mind!”

Meanwhile, Francis reconsidered. He said to Brother Leo, “What was I thinking? Brother Ruffino is one of the gentlest and kindest of all the friars. How dare I ask this great man of Assisi
to do something I would not do?”  Brother Leo knew Francis quite well, and could foresee what would happen next. Sure enough, taking Brother Leo with him, Francis headed to the Cathedral, shedding his clothes along the way. Brother Leo bundled Francis’ clothes up, carrying as well the clothes Brother Ruffino left behind.

When Francis entered the Cathedral, he heard Ruffino stumbling through his sermon, trying his very best. Francis walked up to the pulpit to stand next to his brother, both of them naked to the world. Francis put a finger over Ruffino’s lips, and gently took over preaching.

Francis reminded everyone that in his Passion, Jesus was stripped naked and ridiculed, yet endured it out of the deep love he had for the people of Jerusalem. Then Francis spoke of his love for the people of Assisi. He asked them to stop judging others by their clothes, their wealth, and their titles of honor, or any externals. Then he reminded everyone that in his nakedness on the cross, Jesus was clothed more finely than any king.

Next he asked Ruffino to fetch the Holy Scriptures, and to open to Paul’s letter to the Philippians, the passage we just heard.

Ruffino did, and holding the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God, for the first time ever, he did not feel ashamed. He felt himself clothed with God’s love. He was able to totally forget himself, and truly listen to God speaking to his heart through the scriptures.

The crowd grew silent, some began weeping, and even Francis choked back tears as Ruffino read the passage, “He emptied himself, and took the form of a slave.”

That day many people truly saw Christ on the cross, experienced him looking at them with love, and were moved to conversion. People turned to God, and changed their lives.

Without saying a word, Brother Leo started to unbundle the clothes he carried, so that Brothers Francis and Ruffino could dress themselves again. All the way back to the hermitage, the three sang with joy, that through humility, obedience, and self-forgetfulness, God’s glory had been proclaimed, the Gospel had come to life, and souls were saved as people experienced Christ’s love. In being willing to be fools for Christ, Brother Ruffino and Francis truly let Christ be revealed through their simplicity and human weakness.

Humility is a powerful antidote for self-consciousness.

Humility also holds the only real power to disarm pride.

Obedience, ironically, can open the path to a joyful freedom that our need to control only blocks.

Self-forgetfulness is the way to find ourselves by losing ourselves.

With self-forgetfulness, our ego gets out of the way of Christ coming to life within us.

St. Francis, Brother Ruffino and Brother Leo found their life in Christ, and that discovery filled them with the Joy of the Gospel.

Holy Week invites us all to the same joyful discoveries, through death to life.