

Sermon preached by Bishop Gordon Scruton at TSSF Convocation, at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, OH 6.23.17

We've just experienced the Underground Rail Road Museum. Our minds and hearts are still processing both the destructive ways some of God's beloved people dehumanize and enslave each other and the risky ways some of God's beloved people are willing to live against the values of society to help bring liberation and freedom to those who are enslaved.

To be called to follow Jesus in the way of Francis is to be called to live against the enslaving values of Western culture in this generation. How do we do this? How can we embody and help others to practice the counter-cultural way of Jesus in the spirit of Francis?

Of course it is not easy. So I want to offer four enduring spiritual practices that have been wellsprings of courage and hope for people who have heard God's call to be liberated and to help liberate others from bondage.

Remember the times in which Francis lived? The world and the church were systemically enslaved in local wars and the massively inhumane Crusades.

Yet our hearts leap with hope and joy when we look at what the Holy Spirit did in and through Francis, in that context.

What made Francis so unique and transformational was his passionate, all consuming love relationship with Jesus. Before his call, he was distracted by many things. (Are any of you distracted by many things?) What grew in Francis was his whole-hearted passion to follow Christ. This longing and practice kept growing in him, shaped every moment of his life and shaped the life of the early Franciscan community. Francis put it this way: "The Rule and life of the Friars Minor is simply to live the Gospel."

What is the Gospel he tried to live? Jesus told us with clarity and simplicity: "You shall love the Lord our God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This is the life-giving purpose for which God birthed each of us into this world. We all know these familiar words...BUT to what degree do we actually practice whole hearted love for God moment by moment?

Is there anyone here who has actually learned to practice whole hearted, passionate love for God every moment of your daily life, no matter what is going on?

Let me ask another question: Is there anyone here who longs to be more whole-hearted in your love for God day by day?

And what does it mean to love our neighbors? Jesus was asked that question because we human beings like to create the illusion that there are some people who do not fit the category of neighbors. Jesus was very clear. He called us to practice what we did in our healing service last night. Think of your enemies, think of the people you fear or

despise or ignore...these people are neighbors God calls us to love. Every person on the planet and the planet itself is our neighbor.

Is there anyone here who has learned to practice love of all your neighbors as fully as Jesus and Francis did?

Another question: Is there anyone here who has a deep desire to practice loving all your neighbors, including all your enemies and the planet, on a more consistent, daily basis?

As we seek to live our charism as followers of Jesus...in the way of Francis...I can imagine Jesus and Francis saying to us right now, with loving eyes and tender words...

Dear people of the 3rd Order, remember that you are God's beloved, sent to embody Christ's radical love of God and neighbor with your whole life. With tears we say to you the same word the angel spoke to the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2. You have lost much of your first love. You have held yourself back from living the radical love of Jesus that flowed through the words and actions of the early Christians and Franciscans. Return to your first love. Keep learning how to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, and offering and sacrifice to God. This is our invitation, our longing for you.

So the first wellspring of liberating hope is for us to ask the Holy Spirit to help us return to our first love of Jesus, as we see it practiced in the lives of Francis and Clare.

The second wellspring of liberating hope flows from being in relationship with a community of people who long to make loving Jesus and loving all neighbors the passionate, risk taking, guiding motivation of their lives. Did you notice how the conductors on the Underground Railroad worked together as a community? We cannot keep our passionate practice of love for God and all neighbors alive without the example, the support, the encouragement, and the accountability of other human beings who are also seeking to be led by the Spirit to live this way of life.

People in Recovery from addiction know they need to meet regularly with a group of others seeking recovery to keep their passion for recovery fresh and to keep learning how to live in sobriety.

All of us are addicted...I mean that literally...addicted to the fears, the distractions, the busyness, the insidious, mind numbing consumerism of Western people and culture which surrounds and seeks to devour us.

By the grace of God, we can all find liberating hope and strength to live as counter-cultural people as we meet regularly with a community of support and accountability. Through community, the Holy Spirit helps us withdraw from our addiction to Western Culture, and discover the fullness of life that Francis models for us and that the Spirit of Jesus inspires us to live.

While you have been here this week, have any of you been inspired by the examples of others in the 3rd Order?

When you return home, who are the people you meet with regularly who inspire you to keep deepening and growing your love for God and all your neighbors?

If you do not have a regular group to inspire and support you...ask God to help you find one or two other passionate followers of Jesus with whom you can meet. You might have to look beyond your parish. Perhaps you could find a Roman Catholic Secular Franciscan in your area. Perhaps the Spirit might lead you to a person who from another denomination and culture who lives near you and is passionately in love with Jesus. Or you could make a regular phone call or video connection with a Tertiary outside your area, perhaps a person you have met here this week, who can be your spiritual support community. Your heart knows that a passionate, deepening life of love for God and neighbor can't be sustained over the long haul without a support/accountability Circle which can sustain your liberating hope and grounding in God's transforming love at this time in history.

The third wellspring of liberating hope is prayer. Now all of us pray. It is part of our Rule and our daily practice. But what is the depth of our prayer?

As a husband, imagine me taking time every morning and evening to tell my wife what I want her to do to help me and to help others. Imagine me texting her throughout each day asking her to do things for me and for other people. If that was the primary way I related with my wife, what kind of a relationship would we have? All I'd be doing is giving her orders all day...and I'd be neglecting the rich joy and fulfillment of having an intimate mutual relationship with her.

Prayer is our whole-hearted love relationship with Jesus, with the Holy Trinity. It requires wasting time with God, just enjoying God's presence, enjoying God's creation with God, laughing, dancing, playing, creating with God for the simple joy of being together, delighting in each other.

Charlie McCarron reminded us in his workshop Wednesday night that there is a long and deep tradition of contemplative prayer, hermitage prayer in the Franciscan and the 3rd Order Traditions. Francis probably spent 6 months of the year in a hermitage, in contemplative prayer. Many 3rd Order members have been called to the focused practice of contemplative, solitary prayer. In fact, every renewal of the Franciscan movement has included an increased practice of hermitage, solitary, extended times of prayer.

If we are faithful to our Franciscan roots, we will remember that none of our active work can be effective in the long run unless it flows from the deep wellspring of prayer. If we hope to keep our passionate love for God and neighbor fresh and focused, we will need to make time for contemplative prayer both in our personal lives and as part of the core vocation of the 3rd Order. We could begin by taking two hours a week or perhaps a day a month, in solitary communion with God on behalf of the church and the world.

Is there anyone here whose heart has a longing for more intimate prayer time in solitude with God?

Finally, Jesus and Francis remind us that all of us need some specific way to act on our love for the poor, our love for God's creation, our love for others in need. Of course we are called to serve the needs of others by giving money, writing letters, working to change unjust systems.

Jesus and Francis also call us to be specific and personal. Look at Jesus stopping to talk with and bring healing to so many needy people in the Gospels. Look at Francis stopping to talk with and then embrace the lepers. We can make friends with people in prison or with undocumented immigrants or with isolated elders or with addicted young people or with interfaith sisters and brothers or people of other races.

Your heart knows that if you really desire to live as a faithful follower of Jesus and Francis you will prayerfully find specific people in need with whom you will share a continuing relationship.

Can you name right now the specific people in your life who are in need and are part of your circle of face-to face care?

I've been longing to resonate with your heart this morning...and open up God's liberating, hope filled ways to live and deepen your joyful connection with God at this time... when the foundations of the Western Church and society are being shaken.

The wellsprings of personal and corporate renewal in the Christian Church and the Franciscan Order have always involved a passionate return to these four practices: 1) to passionate and all consuming love for God and neighbors, 2) to small support/accountability communities to keep that love alive, 3) to renewed depth of contemplative, solitary prayer and 4) to specific relationships with people in need as the fruit of our life with God.

In what ways is God inviting you to renew and deepen your life with Jesus and Francis in these four areas?

Let us take a few moment of silence for each of you to talk with Jesus and Francis about how they might be inviting you to make some changes in your practice of these four wellsprings of liberating hope in your life.