

**“Stripping Down to What Matters”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

01 August 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Ephesians 4:1-16

John 6:24-35

*“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life,  
which the Son of Man will give you.”*

– John 6:27

**Prayer**

**Holy Giver of the Word,**

**Quiet our thoughts**

**And prepare our hearts to turn toward you unguardedly.**

**Speak to us for we are ready to listen.**

**May our listening renew our faith and change us where it really matters.**

**In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, we pray. Amen.**

No one, not even Guido, the bishop of Assisi himself, was prepared for the events that unfolded in the town’s piazza in the fall of 1206. Pietro di Bernardone, one of the most successful fabric merchants in the medieval city of Assisi, dragged his son, Giovanni – whom he fondly called Francesco or “the Frenchman” – to a public audience with the bishop. Although he loved his son, Pietro no longer recognized the man Francesco or Francis in English had become.

As a youth, Francis reveled in the life of luxury, wealth and privilege into which he was born. He spent his father’s money on extravagant parties for his friends and was known for his love of wine, poetry and music. Like his father, young Francis was also a practicing Catholic who attended the Sunday mass regularly but did not give much thought to the role of faith in his life outside the church. This was the thirteenth-century and Francis’ world was suffused with the ideals of brave knights winning honor and glory in the battlefield and dreams of romance between gallant knights in bright shining armor and fair maidens. Francis was convinced that his vocation was to make a heroic impact on his world. When war broke out between Assisi and its rival city-state of Perugia, Francis, who was only 21 at the time, donned an expensive suit of armor and went after his dream of knighthood.

Much to his parents’ dismay, Francis’ aspiration to become a celebrated hero of Assisi ended abruptly when he was captured and taken to Perugia as a prisoner of war. There, Francis endured a year of incarceration until his father was able to raise a huge amount of money to buy his freedom. But, in prison, Francis changed. He fell seriously ill and his weakened body became the catalyst for a spiritual transformation. In captivity,

the rich young man who aspired to be a hero saw for the first time the shallowness of his ambitions and the superficiality of his privileged life and Francis felt an irresistible desire to follow Christ and be closer to God.

Back in Assisi, Francis started to spend more time in prayer rather than gallivanting around town with his carefree friends. His family and neighbors thought that he had lost his mind when Francis rejected their reverence for money and began giving away his fine clothes and goods to the poor. Pietro was heartbroken! The expensive clothing, the lavish lifestyle and the lucrative family textile business represented to him not just his life's work but his paternal duty to give Francis the very best wealth could provide. As a father, Pietro could not understand that Francis' newly found faith had prepared him to imitate Jesus and enter a life of self-emptying. While money and status remained central in Pietro's vision of the good life in the world, Francis' life was now shaped by two main events in the life of Christ: Jesus' birth, when Christ was a vulnerable baby, naked and needy, and the crucifixion, when Jesus gave up everything to die on the cross so that others might have faith and life abundant. Their priorities, passions and devotions had put father and son on a collision course.

The inevitable clash happened when Pietro found out that while he was away on business, Francis took several bolts of expensive cloth from his storeroom and carted them to a neighboring village where he sold the fabric, the cart and the horse. Then he donated the whole bag of money to the priest at the church of San Damiano that lay in ruins just below the city walls. It meant absolutely nothing to Pietro that his son insisted that he had a profound spiritual experience at the dilapidated church building. While he was sitting at the church in prayer, Francis said that God spoke to him from the crucifix on the wall: ***"Francis, do you not see how my house is falling into ruin? Go and repair it for me!"***<sup>ii</sup> Taking the words literally, Francis reached for the most immediate source of funds available – his father's wealth, to rebuild San Damiano. Frustrated with his son, Pietro demanded that Francis return the money he had taken or renounce his inheritance. To Pietro's surprise, Francis told him that he would gladly renounce his father's wealth, but he would not give back the money because it now belonged to God and to the poor. Infuriated, Pietro hauled his son to the piazza, the city central square, to be tried as a thief.

Bishop Guido agreed that Francis should give back his father's money. And it was on that day at the piazza that the wild youth turned into a man of deep faith and the medieval playboy had a change of heart that transformed him into a passionate follower of Christ. Francis took the purse full of money from the bishop's hand and gave it to his father. Then he stripped off all his clothes in front of the whole crowd of onlookers and placed them at Pietro's feet. Standing fully naked in the city square, Francis publicly rejected the privilege and wealth he had known all his life and he said loud and clear: ***"Listen, all of you... Hitherto I have called Pietro Bernardone my father; but because I am resolved to serve God, I return to him the money on account of which he was so perturbed, and also the clothes I wore which are his; and from***

***now on I will say, 'Our Father who art in heaven,' and not 'father Pietro Bernardone.'*"<sup>iii</sup>**

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, said that on that day at the piazza, Pietro di Bernardone walked away defeated. He lost his son forever, but Francis was released into the service of God, of Christ's Church and humanity.<sup>iii</sup>

Even though the pages of our Holy Scriptures are filled with stories about people who had life-transforming, oftentimes inexplicable encounters with the mystery of the divine before they embraced the call to live for God, we still feel unsettled by the shocking radicality of Francis' faith and dramatic decision to give his whole life to Christ and to the Church. It is both fascinating and odd that Francis of Assisi continues to be one of the most popular saints of the Church, remembered by both Catholics and Protestants as a kind of inclusive, secular, and denominationally indistinct saint. Centuries of tradition have diluted Francis's devotion to Christ and the man who stripped naked as a sign of his steadfast love for the humanity and humility of Jesus has been turned into an uncontroversial Christian and an accessible saint for all times, causes and places. Today, St. Francis is admired by animal-rights activists, feminist groups, peacemakers and vegetarians – even though he was not a vegetarian himself –<sup>iv</sup> and he is also the patron saint of ecologists, animals, stowaways, Italy and, quite ironically, of merchants too. Francis's life became increasingly and widely popular as his hard-edged commitment to follow Christ and serve the Church was softened by a new universal understanding of him as an ecumenical saint and a poor holy man who had a genuine compassion for all living things.

Our instinctive tendency to tame Francis' spiritual awakening at the piazza in Assisi and remember his life, prayers and sayings very selectively betrays our post-modern discomfort with transformative religious experiences that we cannot fully comprehend or much less explain. Most of us are suspicious of that kind of intense religious fervor that empowered Francis to break with his former life and give himself wholeheartedly to a new purpose, a new mission and to a religious vocation. Honestly, our uneasiness with Francis' daring physical and spiritual nakedness comes from our own unspoken and misguided apprehension about being asked to give to God and to the Church more than what we are willing or ready to give. We prefer to admire rather than imitate people of faith like Francis because we fear that if we take them too seriously, God might ask us to change or, worse still, do something sacrificial, radical, and unthinkable that we would rather not do. Almost every single one of us would probably say, if asked, that we are not quite ready to strip ourselves of everything we do and love in our lives to take on a religious vocation or to live fully in the service of the Church. And the good news is that we do not have to.

In the Letter to the Christians in Ephesus, the writer makes the extraordinary assertion that Christ gives each one of us a gift that we can use to build up the Church in love. We all share the same baptism. We all have one Lord. God is the Father and

---

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

Mother of us all. We are all united by faith. We all belong to the same Body of Christ, which is the Church Universal. We are all joined and knitted together and have the collective responsibility to promote the growth of the Living Church. But the writer claims that we have different gifts. The passage that Heather read this morning says that each one of us has a gift, something we are good at, something we can offer, something the Church needs. Some of us are equipped to be apostles, others pastors, some evangelists, prophets, and others teachers and, together, we are the saints of the Church, called by God to use our skills, our abilities, our potential, our hearts and minds, all those gifts that are uniquely ours, to keep the Church alive, vibrant, dynamic, active, committed and faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Unlike St. Francis, your love for God and for the Church may not require that you strip naked on the town common, renounce your life, give up all our investments, quit your job and walk away from your family to live entirely for Christ. As the Letter to the Ephesians makes it clear, there are a variety of ways to follow Christ and be faithful to our call to love the Church. God needs Christians like Francis who are willing to live a life of self-emptying to repair and rebuild the Church, but God also needs pastors and lay preachers, musicians and singers, doctors and writers, engineers and lawyers, retirees and homemakers, parents, youth and children who are willing to make the radical decision to use their Christ-given gifts to the fullest and without hesitation so that the Church may teach, challenge, and provoke us and others to work not just for the food that perishes, but as Jesus said to the folk who wanted more bread to satiate their physical hunger, for the food that nourishes our spirit and gives us enduring spiritual sustenance to live for what is eternal.

The honest question we all have to ask ourselves and wrestle with is whether we believe that the Church matters enough to motivate us to use our gifts, even when we feel that we do not have one single minute to spare in our busy lives, even in the midst of a pandemic, to repair, rebuild, and work to strengthen in love the Church of Jesus Christ.

You and I live in a very different world from first century Palestine or from thirteenth-century Assisi. The western world, our world, is more secular and much less likely to speak the language of miracles and much more likely to be uncomfortable with stories about radical religious callings. While a recent survey released by the Pew Research Center reported that Americans, more than people in other countries hit hard by COVID, have turned to religion during the pandemic,<sup>v</sup> most are seeking spiritual refuge, a sacred space of respite from the chaos created by the virus and a place of renewal where they can breathe out anxiety, breathe in hope and re-center. It is understandable that in times of crisis when our lives are disrupted by forces beyond our control that people turn to religion as a temporary source of comfort and security, but not even the surge of the Delta variant changes the fact that western civilization has pushed the Church to the sidelines. If we are honest with ourselves, we cannot deny that we no longer need divine revelation to explain what happens in our world, we have

science. We no longer need oracles and prayers to control nature, we have technologies. We do not need priests and prophets to organize society, we have liberal democracies, elections, and a secular legal system. If we are sick, we do not go to a priest, we go to a doctor and take the right medication or vaccine that can keep us healthy. If we are in search of information that can make our lives better, give us more knowledge, and help us make meaningful connections with other people, we have the all-knowing, all-present, and matchless power of Google and social media at our fingertips. In functional terms, everything religion and the Church used to do and offer is now done by something else in our society.<sup>vi</sup> So the vexing question “Does the Church matter?” is one that you and I cannot avoid if we are going to decide whether or not to use our gifts to build up the Church.

In the twenty-first century, especially during a pandemic that kept us from gathering in person for 16 months, we have to ask: does this building, this sanctuary, the organ and this pulpit still matter? Does this time we gather to listen to the ancient words of Scriptures, pray and worship together still matter at all? Does this very human institution that has so insistently tried to bend its mission and ministries to the contours of the Gospel of Christ still make any difference in our lives?

I believe so. I do believe the Church still matters! And I am not just saying this out of my own sense of self-preservation since it is the church that pays my salary. I really do believe that on grand scales and on modest scales, the Church matters and matters deeply.

Each one of you knows that the Church matters because it is the glimmer of such awareness that has brought you here this morning to worship in person or virtually when there are so many other choices, other allegiances and other priorities that could have kept you away. Your choice to take time to worship today is an undeniable affirmation of your inner conviction that the Church is relevant enough to persuade you to re-order your time, your schedule, your commitments, your relationships and your entire life to gather in community and to re-affirm your faith that the Acton Congregational Church matters to you because it is here that our hunger for spiritual wholeness, for a life of purpose, for inner transformation, for a new way of thinking about what makes for a good life in the world, for a deeper awareness of God, for community, for salvation and for a call to live for something bigger than ourselves is satisfied by Christ, the Bread of Life.

The Church matters, despite its many shortcomings and shameful moments, because, on its very best days, the Church gathers for one reason: to inspire you and me to practice what the late Irish philosopher Iris Murdoch called “unselfing.”<sup>vii</sup> When Jesus confronts the crowds who had just experienced the miracle of the multiplication of bread and, very frankly, tells them, “***Don’t waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food the Son of Man provides***,”<sup>viii</sup> Jesus is asking them to unself. He is

---

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

telling them to open their eyes and turn their attention away from themselves, from their immediate need, from their desire for more bread, and see the world not through the lens of their selfish concerns, anxieties, and narrow priorities but through the lens of God's love, grace and goodness. On its very best days, the Church does exactly that. It reminds us that too often our view of the world is clouded by our fat selfish egos, and the Church challenges, prepares and equips us to unself. And it is this unselfing, the commitment to transcend all other loyalties and devotions to be part of a community of Christians who are eager to use our Christ-given gifts to remind humankind that we become finer, better, fuller human beings when we open our hearts to Christ that makes the Church matter, especially in the secular west. There is no other place in our society where the words we hear weekly from Scripture and from the pulpit are like sandpaper that continuously rubs against the rough edges of our lives and shapes us into real human beings – people with a heart. It is in the Church that we keep practicing how to be followers of Christ who are willing to stand with real people at the joyful and tragic times of life – at births and funerals, weddings and confirmation, when the world seems peaceful and when a new surge of the coronavirus threatens to upend our lives all over again. The Church matters because this community of faith gives us a brighter light to follow than the glimmer of our own little flashlights and it nourishes and sustains our unselfing with the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

I believe the Church matters because this very human institution invites and encourages you and me to take Christ, the Bread of Life, into ourselves and the love of Christ enlarges our hearts and help us to unself so rather than seeking to be consoled, we learn to offer comfort and peace. Instead of worrying about whether or not we are understood, we make a decision to understand. In place of social relevance, we offer nonsensical faith in a God of love and grace. Instead of meeting injury with anger, we practice forgiveness. Instead of seeking to be loved, we insist that the God of love called us into the Church where our unselfing gives us the strength and the courage to love the world with a kind of reckless, countercultural, and shocking love that saves and transforms human lives.

In a profound spiritual moment of unselfing, Francis of Assisi got naked in front of the whole town and dedicated his life to God, Christ, the Church and humanity. Now it is our turn to strip down to what really matters and decide for ourselves if, like Francis, we too believe that God is calling us to repair, renew, and rebuild the Church. It is up to you and me to decide if we believe that the Church still matters enough to make us want to unself, to stop looking inwardly, to stop focusing too much on our own needs, our anxieties and dare to look up to our call to love God, follow Christ, and use our gifts passionately, energetically, enthusiastically and lovingly to build up our church.

Friends, I will be on vacation until Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup>, so you will not see me for a while, but I invite you to let Francis' brave nakedness stir in your hearts the desire to love God more deeply, to eat the Bread of Life, to drink from the cup of salvation, and to experience something powerful and transformative in the presence of the Living Christ.

May you find in your heart the irresistible desire to love the Church and to become the evidence in the world as to why the Church of Jesus Christ matters and why you are willing to offer your gifts, your time and resources to keep our church alive.

Until we see each other again, friends, may the peace of Christ be with you.

Shalom.

---

<sup>i</sup> Jacques le Goff in Saint Francis of Assisi, p. 29.

<sup>ii</sup> By Valerie Martin in Being St. Francis, The Atlantic, August 2000 issue [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/08/being-st-francis/378299/].

<sup>iii</sup> Fr. Richard Rohr OFM in Naked Before God, Franciscan Way: Part One, Center for Action and Contemplation, 04 October 2019 [https://cac.org/naked-before-god-2019-10-04/].

<sup>iv</sup> By Joan Acocella in Rich Man, Poor Man, The New Yorker. 14 January 2013 issue [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/14/rich-man-poor-man].

<sup>v</sup> Religion & Peace, a blog by Hartford Seminary in The Role of Faith in Times of Crisis: American Attitudes Toward Religion During the Pandemic, published on 23 June 2021 [https://blog.hartsem.edu/2021/06/23/faith-in-times-of-crisis/?fbclid=IwAR1Y2Zur\_DpQhzuoQSwHlpiXB7FftECVnXshhzfaUyMH-\_SPTbQDRzpsZfc].

<sup>vi</sup> I am grateful to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks for this insight into the relationship between the western civilization and religion.

<sup>vii</sup> See Iris Murdoch in The Sovereignty of Good.

<sup>viii</sup> John 6:27 – The Message.