



Please note, this summer we are re-running reflections from the last B cycle (2018).

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jer. 23:1-6

Ps 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

Eph. 2:13-18

John 10:27

By Rhett Engelking

In the introduction to his book *Finding Francis, Following Christ*, Fr. Michael Crosby reintroduces the term *Anachoresis* to describe the spiritual process of withdrawal that St. Francis of Assisi took when overwhelmed by the culture of violence he experienced in his day. *Anachoresis* may look like surrender or weakness, but in choosing an ascetic posture, Francis was choosing not to participate in the cycle of violence as a movement towards inner freedom. Very much a man immersed in the marketplace among the people, Francis was also known to spend time in caves and extreme seclusion.

In the Gospel for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus similarly urges his apostles to “Come away by yourselves and rest awhile.” In this command, Jesus empathically senses that the apostles may need to recover from the weariness of their public ministry and attend to their own spiritual and physical needs. While the Gospel chronicles the highlights of Jesus’ public ministry, it also gives clues as to the important role that solitude plays in the practice of public ministry. These are chaotic times, and it is important to know that withdrawal may be necessary if we are to retain our inner freedom and our universal call to holiness.

This instance of *anachoresis* in the Gospel is particularly significant in the way that Jesus violates his own directive. He recognizes that the crowds are desperately congregating like sheep in search of a shepherd, and a different kind of *anachoresis* is evident. Instead of withdrawing from external view, Jesus withdraws internally from a need to be alone. This type of inner withdrawal can be a difficult choice because, as altruistic Christians, it is quite easy to put off necessary self-care in favor of playing the dutiful servant. It is perfectly reasonable to suggest that Jesus may indeed be ignoring the needs of the disciples and those of his own body. This passage in Mark is particularly intriguing because it comes right after news of the gruesome death of John the Baptist. Surely it was a troubling time for public prophets, and yet the shock of John the Baptist’s death left a spiritual void and sheep without a shepherd.

In these times of heightened polarization, when race, class, and culture wars are front and center in the news cycle, it is more than tempting to withdraw from public life. Turning off the television, deactivate social media accounts, or escaping to a retreat or vacation may very well appeal to our

internal sense of balance. When “the Lord our Justice,” as Jeremiah names the divine, is not visible within our society, *anachoresis* can be a courageous path to peace. And yet, we must acknowledge that the injustices that contribute to the polarization are not brand new and will not disappear as a result of our *anachoresis*. What moved Jesus to pity may well have been an acknowledgement that, if all the good shepherds withdraw in times of struggle, the spiritual void may well be filled with those whose intentions are unholy. As the writer and activist Naomi Klein has exposed on numerous occasions, there is indeed a whole “shock doctrine” that has been honed and employed to exploit the vulnerability of those who have experienced great loss. In absence of a good shepherd, vulture capitalists, white supremacists, and false prophets have swept in to exploit tragedy.

It is imperative as a Christian community that we recognize these as apocalyptic times. Rather than exploiting a collective fear about the End of the World for personal profit or cowering from the sheer enormity of mass turbulence, we are being called to tend to the scattered sheep of the world. “The Lord our Justice” is longing to rescue those who are mired in the divisions of our time. His message is a transracial, transnational, and non-denominational oneness and we mustn’t fail to teach it at all times.

Rhett Engelking worked at the Franciscan Action Network and was studying at Georgetown University when this was originally posted in 2018.