

Assisi in Umbria

24 July 2008

Dear Friends,

Early this morning, I caught a bus out of Rome with four Lebanese nuns. Like me, they were eager to see Assisi, to walk the streets and climb the hills where Francis and Clare roamed centuries ago. Our route required a tricky transfer, and we navigated the change together. None of us spoke a lick of Italian; the nuns spoke enough English to get by.

On the second leg up to Assisi, the quieter nun grabbed the seat just behind the driver, perched high behind a bright red rail. The road from Perugia into Assisi winds and climbs and dips unannounced. And the nervous nun held onto that red rail for dear life. With every sharp turn, she'd let out a little whistle, just a little one, and squeeze the rail a little tighter.



Figure 1 - Nuns in the Holy Land

Whenever she spotted a blue sign for “Assisi” (and there were several), she'd say “Assisi!” and point. As if the driver needed a little help. And when, finally, the city appeared, cut into a green Umbrian hill, that same nervous nun offered us all a long, grateful

“Ahhhhhhhh!” All the while, the companion seated by her side watched with a mixture of love and bemusement.

I've always found religious celibates fascinating and lovely (for the most part). And thankfully, on the ride to Assisi, I intrigued them too. A Protestant. A Pastor. A father of daughters. A fan of Francis. An American! Who'd have thought I could cut an exotic figure on the highways of Italy? You can't make this stuff up. When we parted, we'd enjoyed our short time together and helped one another figure things out. So much of the fun in traveling is the people you meet!

I.



Figure 2 - The Grishaw-Jones' at the Vatican

I decided to do the Assisi trip alone after consulting the other four women I'm traveling with. After a long day at the Roman Forum and another at the Vatican Museum, the younger three seemed a little tired of the columns and crosses show.

It turns out that 7-year-old American girls zone out as the 20<sup>th</sup> chiseled disciple drifts by. Who'd have known? Kate and I can't get enough of the art in Rome. It's everywhere, and it's unbelievable in color and beauty and creativity and (for the most part) theological relevance. The Sistine Chapel? Are you kidding? Michelangelo's *Pieta*? The Pantheon? The Spanish Steps? Almost everywhere we look, there's the stunning work of a brilliant artist.

But there's a limit to the kids' tolerance. Who can blame them? As much as they delight in the great stuff, there comes a point...And often it comes hard.

Traveling with children is so very different from traveling alone. That I can say with absolute certainty. In Israel, I lingered as long as I wished, made notes in my journal, even sketched a bit. I climbed and climbed to my heart's content; I logged miles and hours and filled myself to overflowing. It was all about me.

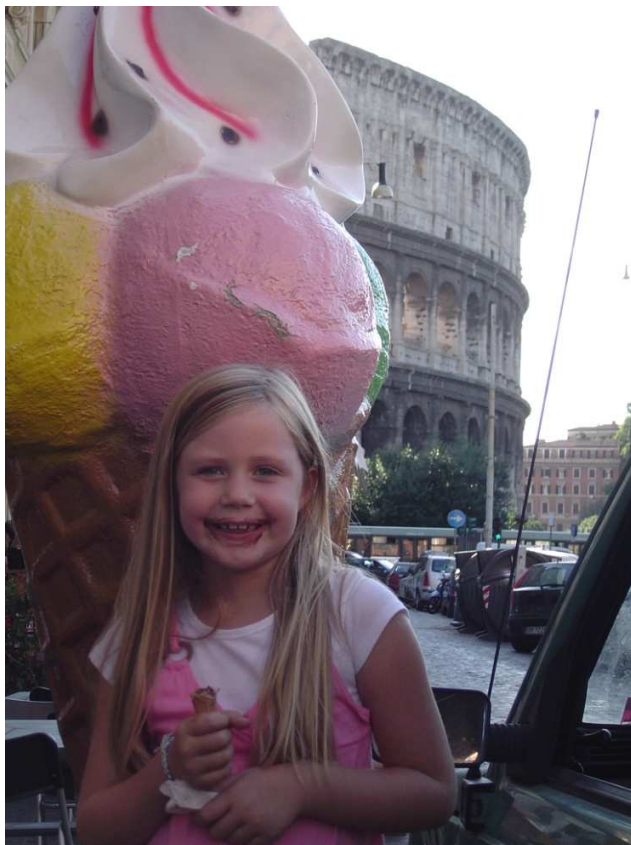
But, here, now, I have to pay attention to other beings, to my little beings. Sometimes, I get this right; sometimes, I don't. It's so easy to want them to settle into (or keep up with) my routine, to find (or adjust to) my rhythm. The thing is, they're not at all like me; or at least, they have their own passions, interests, grooves. I'm having to learn all that, sometimes over and over and over again. Community requires patience, humility, love. Whether the community is a family or a church or a neighborhood. Patience, humility, love. Lord, have mercy!

Sitting high above Assisi, in the woods around Francis' Hermitage, I re-read these words of theologian Christopher Bamford:

*Love, agape, as St. Paul means it, begins with the terrifying recognition of the reality of something, someone, truly "other..." Love recognizes the unconditional significance of something other than ourselves. We have a dense and carefully cultivated sense of our own importance – which we*

*forever shore up and reinforce by projecting into the world in our own image and then acting in it like a god. Then, suddenly, standing before a great work of art, a beautiful landscape, a person, something happens: we lay down this objectified self in recognition of something larger that, momentarily, takes possession of us and makes us feel more fluid and less bounded than we felt before.*

There's nothing like three weeks in Italy – with three kids – to bring you face to face with the smarmy and inconvenient truth. A dense and carefully cultivated sense of my own importance? Which I forever shore up and reinforce by projecting into the world in my own image? Acting in it like a god? Ouch! Guilty!



Suddenly, there's Hannah, almost 7, standing before the Coliseum, dripping with ice cream. She's not me. She's so clearly and delightfully *not* me. She's got her own smile, her own joy, her own dreams, her own way of gobbling gelato. And my calling – as her father – is to celebrate, love and honor who she is. Who *she* is. Not who I am, but who *she* is. Agape begins with the terrifying recognition of the reality of

something, someone one, truly “other”! And there she is!

Among all the wonders of this four-month sabbatical, I've cherished the opportunity to read and think and make connections. I've read novels by Galloway and Williams, theology by Kierkegaard and Bamford and Brueggeman, poetry by Rumi and Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh. I take time to circle the parts I like, scribble notes in the margins, react from the heart in my journal. It feels as if these writers have traveled with me, bounced in the same busses, stayed up late, sipped from the same tea. (Fortunately, they don't mind my routine *or* my rhythm.)

Christopher Bamford's been a particularly delightful discovery. He dares approach the 'extravagance' at the heart of the gospel and then delightfully interprets Christian tradition in light of that grace. In an essay called "Washing the Feet," Bamford explores something like a Buddhist-Franciscan spirituality:

*Attachment imprisons us in the past, dismembers and fragments us. Detachment releases us for and to the present. Surrendering what is dead, materialized, and arrested in us – our mineral body – we become open to the genuinely new, a new body. Such detachment and openness is faith, the body of faith. Voidness its activity; dematerialization, spiritualization is its effect. "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." Now, hearing is listening, attending. It requires silence and patience; for if you are talking or in a hurry you cannot listen. Faith is inner silence. Listening in silence, renouncing and dissolving the categories of thought which rule us, relinquishing our ego's*

*claim to be self-constituted and autonomous, we become open to the true awareness of things as they are. We hear the word spoken in silence, hear the word that silence speaks. In this way, [the mystic Meister] Eckhart says, the Virgin becomes a wife, a mother.*

High on Mount Subiaso, just outside the old cave Francis used as a hermitage, I stumble into a most remarkable bronze statue. I've seen many statues, many carvings, a whole lot of art since March; this one startles me. It's Francis, and he's lying on his back, in the gravelly dirt. He's kicked off his sandals, he's crossed his legs; his hairy head rests in his hands.



Figure 3 - Francis Reclining Outside Cave

I imagine he's watching a huge white cloud slowly crossing a crystal blue sky. Or he's listening to doves, sparrows, whatever birds sing so pleasantly in these hills.

To listen like *that* has so much to do with detachment and openness. Attachment imprisons me in both my own past and my own wishes and wants. It binds me to limited (and limiting) expectations of Hannah and Kate and every other beautiful person in my life. If the best I can do is project my *own* image into the world and carefully cultivate a sense of my own importance, I hear neither the word spoken in silence nor the word silence speaks.

But detachment, openness, faith: these release me for and to the present. For and to all the others who make up the communion of God in and around my life. For and to the wonders God flings so wildly and prolifically my way. To



Figure 5 - Dove on Ledge at Francis' Hermitage

watch a cloud dance or a child grow, to hear a bird sing or a choir lift off: I set aside all that I *think* the cloud should be or the child or the bird. I surrender my expectations, needs, desires. Never was a bird or a cloud or even my own child created in *my* image. I open up, breathe deep, let it be. Listen! Listen! Life! Life! Francis has a lot to teach me, a saint on his back, in the gravel, watching the clouds roll by.

Strangely, but not surprisingly, that same bronze statue interprets Jesus as much as Francis. Outside the old cave, Francis reminds me that Jesus' 'way of the cross' has as much to do with lying in the dirt as it does healing the broken, as much to do with watching clouds dance as it does washing feet, as much to do with listening to silence as it does preaching the gospel. Even the shape of this statue is cruciform, like thousands of crucifixes across Italy. The way of the cross!

This cross, though, is unlike most of the others. Francis' body rests in the gravel; his passion involves no torture, no

loneliness. Jesus' words linger, unwritten, but vital and true: "Do not worry, saying 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' God knows you need these things! Strive first for the kingdom of God." Francis' life, like Jesus', is full of paradox and mystery. We find our way by forgetting our way. We find ourselves by forgetting ourselves. We leap into action by resting quietly in the dust.

3.

I'm watching Francis and imagining Jesus and thinking about the huge questions facing the church in our time. There's the question of our prophetic witness in an age of capitalism run amok. There's the question of our peace witness in an era obsessed with security, smart bombs and military solutions. On the Central Coast, there are questions of economic justice and affordable housing and immigration politics and opportunity.

And at First Congregational Church? Transitions. Human needs. Social issues. Big questions of financial support and the viability of our dynamic mission. How will we afford our dreams and find resources for our vision? Can we ride out the recession at hand and continue in faith to care and serve and love? 'What will we eat?' 'What will we drink?' 'What will we wear?'

Faith is less concerned with answers than practice. And Francis suggests that practice begins with dirt and gravel, clouds and doves, silence and prayer. We find our way by

forgetting our way. We find ourselves by forgetting ourselves. We leap into action by resting quietly in the dust. We respond to the crises of our time not frantically, not desperately, not fearfully. “Detachment releases us to and for the present.” We respond in faith – listening to the silence, honoring relationships, rejoicing in communion.

What will we eat? What will we drink? Day after day, Sunday after Sunday, Jesus stirs in goblets of grace juice. He pulls apart loaves of warm bread and invites us to a common table of celebration. God feeds us as we feed one another. In high times and low times, in seasons of boom and bust, the church dares not forget. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way, but rejoices in the truth. Love is patient and kind. God feeds us as we feed one another.

So this is my prayer today: that the church continue to do what the church does. That we listen and pray, break bread, bless the fruit of the vine. That we love one another and find joy and purpose in community. More than anything, let us continue to celebrate communion, the breaking of bread and sharing of nourishment that makes us whole. In high times and low times, in seasons of boom and bust, Jesus comes that we might have life. And have it abundantly. All of us.

Yours in that Spirit and Hope,

Dave