

In case you haven't heard, the Pope has been in the country. Did anyone hear about that? Yes, the Pope has been in the US. If you passed a black Fiat on the road on the way to church this morning you may have driven past the Pope. It would not surprise me if he is driving around York County this morning in his famous black Fiat.

The Pope has gotten attention for many reasons this week. Riding around in the black Fiat is one of the observations that people are talking about. This is a Pope that does not live in the opulent official Pope residence in Vatican City but instead lives a modest lifestyle, even carrying his own luggage around at times.

The Pope this week has talked about Climate Change and how we humans are tasked with caring for God's creation. He has talked in front of Congress about marriage, about caring for the unborn, about welcoming the immigrant, and about abolishing the death penalty. He has been consistent and that is unfortunately something that we are not used to in this country from our politicians.

There is one other topic which he has focused on. The other topic which he has focused on with his words and with his actions has been poverty. He has challenged our economic system as creating income inequality and how we need to create a more just and fair society. So where does he get this kind of stuff from? Some call him Marxist or Communist for the ways he raises questions about our economic system we have here in the US.

As this question is asked of the Pope about where he gets this stuff about God's preferential treatment of the poor, we are now going to turn to the Scriptures. In our first Scripture that was read, we heard a story from the gospel of Mark about Jesus hanging out in the Temple. He found himself sitting opposite the place where offerings were brought. It's not coincidental that Mark says that Jesus was sitting opposite to the treasury.

So Jesus is noticing how much money people are putting into the Temple treasury. Now let's put ourselves in the place where Jesus sat. We are in charge of keeping the Temple going. There are bills to pay. The Temple employees need to be paid. The trash needs to be picked up. All of this involves money. So as we watch people come and make their donations, who are we going to be most focused on?

My hunch is that we are going to focus on the wealthy folks that can give enough money to keep our ministries going. We are going to look past the ones who give a little. We may even invite the wealthy folks to a dinner event or something that we can smooze them into even giving more to the cause. In our culture we give preferential treatment to the wealthy. If we believe otherwise, then we are only fooling ourselves.

We now turn to reading our second Scripture this morning. We are in the midst of a sermon series on the New Testament book of James. We have learned that this book has been a somewhat controversial book. The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther called this book "straw" because he did not like what it had to say.

We spent a couple of weeks looking at texts from the first chapter. We read about how James believes that faith without works is worthless. This focus on putting your faith into action was what unsettled Luther who thought that the emphasis in Scripture should be on grace and faith alone.

Today we are going to turn into the 2nd chapter of James. I think the words that we read from Mark and these words from James are words which very much guide Pope Francis and his belief system.

Read James 2:1-9

With Pope Francis in the country this week, I decided to do a little research on what factors influenced him. And what I discovered is that the man who would become the “people’s pope” was a person who was exiled to a lonely place by the church for two years because he was the cause of great division in his church. He was sent away for two years because he was causing division in the church.

The man who would become Pope Francis was born Jorge Mario Bergoglio. He became a Jesuit priest in his 20s. In referring to him during this time, I am going to call him Francis since that is what we know him by now and Francis is a whole lot easier for this Southern boy to say than Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

Francis was a priest in Argentina and he became an early church leader. But Francis was known as being quite brash and authoritative. A lot of people didn’t like him because of his dictatorial manner. He had a way that he wanted things done and he would only accept things being done his way. As a result of being so brash, Francis clashed with lots of other priests.

He clashed with priests who wanted to be more politically active than Francis was comfortable with. Francis was more hands on in his ministry. He made the priests under his responsibility serve as dairy hands and give the milk from their cows to the poor in town.

This division which the presence of Francis caused between priests made the church leadership uncomfortable. As a result Francis was sent to Cordoba, Argentina. Francis lived in a very simple room for 2 years and his only responsibility was to listen to confessions. Francis felt like he was sent to Cordoba for these 2 years as punishment.

Francis describes this period of time as being a very lonely and dark time in his life. He was 50 years old at the time. During this exile he wrote lots and one of the papers he wrote was an essay to keep humble, pray, and allow God to work. But during this 2 year exile Francis began to change. He came out of that period a very different person.

In his time as a Jesuit priest Francis became focused on reading texts like we read this morning. Texts like the story we heard earlier of Jesus celebrating the widow who gave her last two copper coins. A story where her giving out of her poverty was lifted up over the very rich men who gave out of their abundance.

Francis began to read more and more stories like we read from James. Stories where James criticizes churches that pander to the wealthy and ignore the poor among them. Francis' words to the Congress this week and to the American people are not from some political agenda. His words about caring for the poor among us and creating a more just society are based on Scriptures like we just heard.

So how are we doing in living out the words of Jesus and James about the poor? Do we pander to the richest among us? Do we give more weight to the opinion of the person who has lots of material things? Or do we give more weight to the opinion of the person who has very little? Do we focus our ministries toward those that have lots or do we focus our ministries toward those that have very little?

If we want to be challenged about where we are to focus our energies as a congregation then the two passages we have read give us some pretty good guidance. Jesus looks past the giving of the wealthiest and focuses on the ones who are the poorest. James shares some very harsh words for churches that give the best seats to the wealthiest while denying a seat at the table for the poorest.

Richard Sterns, the president of World Vision, shares how passages such as these changed his life. He writes:

Read from p. 1 and 7-8 from *The Hole in the Gospel*. (He shares of how God expects more than merely church attendance but everything and then his story from moving from a CEO of a major company to being with a poor AIDS victim in Uganda.)

Now that the Pope is heading back to Europe, do we ignore his message? Do we ignore the actions of Jesus in the Temple when he celebrated the 2 small copper coins given by this widow? Do we ignore the words of James about not showing favoritism to the wealthy but instead giving preference to the poor?

These are hard words for us to hear. For we are the wealthy compared to most of the world. Are we willing to fully commit to God through Christ?

A full commitment to God in Christ means a commitment to living out these words about lifting up the poorest among us and working hard for a more just society. AMEN.

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-Burke, Daniel, <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2015/09/specials/pope-dark-night-of-the-soul/>

-Given: September 27, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)