

Following the Nonviolent Jesus & Resistance Church - By Frank Cordaro Oct 93

Despite our nation's Judeo-Christian roots, and although a majority of our citizens claim a Christian background, we live in an increasingly faithless society. If there is a dominant faith experience, it's wrapped up in our individualistic addictive First World consumer lifestyles and expressed through our imperial national myths. Sadly, there is little difference between the lifestyle and ethics of those who claim a faith in Jesus and those who do not.

Within our mainline Christian churches we have allowed the powerful Good News of Jesus to fizzle. The salt of our Christian message has lost its counter cultural flavor. What is needed is a renewed commitment to the radical, counter cultural message of the Gospel. This renewed commitment will come about when more and more people begin to reclaim the spirit of the nonviolent activism of Jesus.

JESUS, THE NONVIOLENT ACTIVIST

The quickest and surest way to rediscovering the nonviolent activism of Jesus is by asking: What did Jesus do in his lifetime? How did he act? Who did he hang around with? Who were his friends? Who were his enemies? What were the conflicts in his life? And how did they get resolved?

The lone source available to answer these questions is the biographical sketches of Jesus' life found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The four Gospels give us a picture of a Jesus who works and lives among the common people. He is a lay person with no credentials or formal education. Yet he has unsurpassed knowledge of the scriptures and his Jewish faith. He teaches and acts on his own authority, preaching a radical interpretation of the scriptures.

We also find that Jesus clearly sees himself as a nonviolent social reformer with a social program of his own. The Sermon on the Mount, justice for the poor, unconditional love and unlimited mercy were his social tenets.

Throughout his public ministry, he identifies with the under-dog, the poor, the down and out and the marginal people in his society. He challenges many of the laws and prevailing social norms of his day. No friend of the rich and powerful, he was a thorn in the side of the status quo throughout his public life.

When the time was right, he took his radical message to Jerusalem, leading a major street demonstration in his capital city. Later, he carried out a dramatic assault on the Temple. Later, he was arrested, jailed, put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to death for being a subversive. These actions taken against Jesus were all carried out legally by legitimate authorities. Crucified, Jesus dies between two thieves, abandoned by all, except for a few good women and one male disciple.

For sure, our Christian faith is based on a belief that Jesus is the Christ, Son of God, second person in the Blessed Trinity and resurrected Savior and Reconciler of the World. We believe in the miracles and signs Jesus performed in his lifetime.

Without diminishing those more cosmic and spiritual aspects of our faith, it is of equal importance that we believe and follow a Jesus who was an active nonviolent resister to social injustice. The four Gospels paint a picture of a Jesus who was an advocate for the poor, a social activist who confronted the "powers that be." His tactics included ecclesiastical/civil disobedience.

It is clear Jesus expected his disciples to do the same. Any fair reading of the Book of Acts, the sequel of the Gospel of Luke, will show his disciples picking up where Jesus left off. According to the Book of Acts, the first followers of Jesus often found themselves in jails and prisons, dragged before the judges and governors of their time. Like their master, they are branded "outlaws" and "subversives," and put to death for their faithful witness.

Adapting this unique spirit of Christ for our own time and situation is crucial to reclaiming a needed faith integrity that is woefully lacking in U.S. Christian Churches today.

A CALL FOR A RESISTANCE CHURCH

What is needed is a living example of people, set apart from the dominate culture, yet in the midst of that culture, living lives of faithful nonviolent resistance. What is needed is what I have come to call a Resistance Church. **This Resistance Church, a church within the larger church, has four distinctive marks: 1) downward mobility, 2) direct identification with the poor and the oppressed, 3) direct nonviolent resistance to existing unjust social, economic and political structures, and 4) small, faith-**

based, intentional communities, committed to a radical biblical social justice agenda.

Downward Mobility

On a basic level, the unjust distribution of the world's wealth is at the center of our human family's suffering. We in the U.S. live in a country with 6% of the world's population. Yet, we consume 30 – 40% of the world's developed resources. Within our borders there is a great disparity between the rich and the poor. Quite literally, our consumer habits fuel a national addictive spirit. This spirit holds our First World souls captive. When much of the world is starving to death, we are consuming ourselves to death.

While the majority of people in the dominant culture strive for more and more things to consume, people in the Resistance Church will learn to live on less and less. There is enough thrown away in our society to easily provide for the physical needs of a Resistance Church. Members of this Resistance Church will serve as counterpoints to the larger society's piggish First World consumer habits. In doing so, the Resistance Church will provide for the larger Church an example of how people can live below the poverty line and live well.

Identification With The Poor And The Oppressed

Direct identification with the poor and the oppressed means making the lives and the struggle of the poor and the oppressed part of our everyday lives. It means taking on the same risks and uncertainties that the poor and the oppressed live with every day.

We know that Jesus had direct contact with the poorest and most oppressed of his day. He often performed miracles and signs benefiting them. In their defense, he took on the rich and powerful. He virtually became one of the poor. In addition, the early church was made up mostly of the under-class and persecuted of the Roman Empire. It was from and for these "outlawed" early Christian communities that the New Testament was primarily written.

If we hope to get in touch with the radical nonviolent activist spirit of Jesus, we need to be reading the New Testament in its original context – through the eyes of the poor. Standing in solidarity with the marginal, poor, outlawed,

outcast and underground peoples of the world is the surest way to find the person of Jesus today.

Direct Nonviolent Resistance To Unjust Social, Economic and Political Structures

This is the most noticeable, flashy mark of the Resistance Church. It is also the one that can land you in jail. Is the public violation of civil and ecclesiastical laws necessary? Yes, if we are going to stay true to the example Jesus set for us in the Gospels.

During his ministry, Jesus broke a number of social mores and religious laws when he associated with known sinners and social outcast. He had unacceptable and familiar relationships with women. Throughout his ministry he broke many a Jewish purification and Sabbath law.

According to the three synoptic Gospels, in the last week of his life, Jesus took on the civil and religious authorities directly. His Palm Sunday street demonstration and his follow up Temple Cleansing witness were acts of direct non violent resistance.

In John's Gospel, the Temple Cleansing takes place in the second chapter, at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In John's Gospel, Jesus is in open rebellion against the Church and State officials of his day from the very beginning of his ministry.

Indeed, the primo act of salvation, the ultimate statement of our faith, the resurrection itself was an act of civil disobedience. For when the Roman Empire executed Jesus, he was supposed to remain dead. Rising from the dead put Jesus outside the law. I'd insist that the Resurrect Spirit of Jesus has been outlawed ever since.

In any society dominated by unjust structures and systems, the legitimate legal system is used to protect the unjust structures and systems. Jesus understood this. That is why he took on the institutions and structures of the rich and the powerful through direct and public acts of nonviolent resistance. If we are to follow in his footsteps, are we not called to do the same?

To this I would add that nonviolent resistance is one of the most patriotic actions a citizen of the U.S. can perform. I'm often asked, "Father, do you have to do civil disobedience?" I say in response, "No, one doesn't have to do civil disobedience, but it's the American way!"

If we take a look at our nation's 200 plus year history, we'd find social or political advancements initiated and sustained by

campaigns of protest and dissent that included civil disobedience. It is how we “do social change” in the U.S.

Small, Faith-Based, Intentional Communities, Committed To a Radical Biblical Social Justice Agenda

This is the most difficult aspect of the Resistance Church. Why is this fourth mark the most difficult? After all, downward mobility, direct identification with the poor, and prophetic nonviolent civil disobedience appear to demand much more than living in a supportive, like minded community.

Unfortunately, we live in a very sick society. A “rugged individualistic” spirit dominates our communal life. We no longer know how to live in community with each other. We constantly live our lives alienated from each other. This is most apparent in our families. The rate of divorce, broken families and family abuse in the U.S. is epidemic.

The Murder Nation of the world, we are admittedly the most personally violent people on the earth. In the U.S. you are more apt to be killed by someone you love than by a stranger.

For certain, our selfish consumer habits and addictive behaviors foster this violent communal environment. Addiction and violence are different sides of the same problem.

If community is so hard to pull off, why insist on intentional communities? Simple – because it is the way Jesus expects us to live our lives. Community is essential. It is, if you will, in the script. The New Testament was written by and for people in faith communities. To truly understand and live the way of Jesus, we need to do it in community. Despite our failed attempts, we must live in community to be in community with Christ.

Will It Work?

The Church’s history is replete with examples of how Holy Spirit has renewed the Church in troubled times. Through Church history special people, filled with the Holy Spirit, came forth to revive a radical apostolic way of life. We need only look to the long list of saints, movements and religious orders in Church history to see this dynamic in action.

St. Benedict and St. Francis are two good examples. Both were charismatic leaders. Both started major renewal movements that later became religious orders. And both had a major

influence in renewing and recreating the Church of their day.

Today, most religious orders in the U.S. are dying out. Their numbers are shrinking and their membership is aging. I believe the Holy Spirit is clearing the table for a whole new spiritual direction and renewal in the U.S. Church. I believe the Resistance Church I am writing about is part of this new direction and renewal.

In truth, it’s already happening. There are many people living out one or more of the four marks of the Resistance Church in grass root’s peace and justice communities through the country.

This Resistance Church I’m promoting is connected to a much larger movement of the Holy Spirit that has its modern roots in the experiences of Third World poverty and the work of Liberation Theology. Born in the mists of dire poverty and under the yoke of brutal political repression, Third World Liberation Theology has set a standard by which all other authentic theologies are measured today.

Still, we can’t just mimic the Christian liberation movements in the Third World. We must develop our own First World models of liberation communities based on our own stories, histories and unique settings. The Resistance Church I advocate is just such an effort.

How many people will it take to join the Resistance Church before it can make a difference? We know that one person, whose faith is strong can move mountains. And we know the world could use few good mountain movers right now. So, how many?

It’s always dangerous to pick an exact number needed to effect social change. But as an exercise in what is possible, I tell my Catholic brothers and sisters that all the Resistance Church really needs is one percent of the Roman Catholics in this country. One percent would be just over 500,000 folks! Could you imagine that many “Catholic Worker types” in the cities and villages scattered across the country? What could half a million nonviolent activist Christians living below the poverty line, identifying with the poor, living in intentional communities, and ‘in and out’ of jails and prison, do for our churches and nation? I am certain that if this were to happen, we could help change the spirit and heart of the Christian churches in this nation, if not the course of history.