

From Francis to Fezziwig

BY KATIE COOK

In our search for a lifestyle of integrity and responsibility, how can we avoid turning simplicity into a new legalism for the More Socially Sensitive Than Thou? Francis of Assisi, the curiously merry saint of carefree radical poverty, and Dickens' loveable character Fezziwig remind us that joyful simplicity is much more than cutting back for the sake of cutting back.

About 25 years ago, the Holy Spirit nudged me in a new and unexpected direction: the way of Francis of Assisi. Many people have been drawn to this remarkable thirteenth-century Italian who sought to fully imitate the life of our Lord—but not too many from my own Texas Baptist background. My prosperity-theology rearing was certainly at odds with the curiously joyful saint of carefree, radical poverty.

Francis taught me a thing or two about living the gospel. Simplicity was certainly an important lesson—but so was the paradoxical joy that came with it.

Lately I've noticed that Francis' *joyful simplicity* is missing in the lives of many of us who have chosen the path of radical discipleship. In our search for a lifestyle of integrity and responsibility, we have misunderstood simplicity.

I originally embraced the way of Christian simplicity because I was so tired of petty rules, so burdened with "don'ts" and "shall nots." But I fear we are in grave danger of making radical discipleship into a new legalism. Indeed, radical evangelicals can be as intolerant as fundamentalists, with arrogance and wholesale condemnation for Christian sisters and brothers who are "less enlightened," whose consciousness has not been "raised."

Had I fled from the Holier Than Thou only to run face-to-face into the More Socially Sensitive Than Thou?

None of which seems to me to be of the spirit of Francis—and certainly not of Jesus.

Lately I've been responding more seriously to the challenge of Francis: to keep joy and celebration within strict discipleship, to prove that there is more to simplifying than cutting back for the sake of cutting back.

I started by noting things the human spirit cannot live without. Color was what I noticed first.

While researching the life of Anne Hutchinson, the rebellious member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the seventeenth century, for a play I was writing for my youth group, I was appalled and depressed by the description of life in that early American Puritan community. The excessive primness and stern attitude toward daily living terrified me. Colors were discouraged, and enjoyment was suspect. A good upright Christian wore somber hues—gray, black, and brown. I would have shriveled and died in that atmosphere!

I love colors—in sunsets, flowers, balloons, stained-glass with the sun streaming through, clothing, window curtains, and impressionist paintings. Vivid, brilliant splashes of colors are essential to my spiritual health. And so I came to my first conclusion: I must find a way to simplify my lifestyle without killing the colors in it.

Merriment also invited anathema in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Laughter has often been suspected by Christians. There may be no explicit documentation of Jesus laughing, but surely he did! How could he live in the world he made, brimming with the wonders of nature and delights of friendship, and never laugh? *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz suggests that Jesus would not have been invited to so many dinners if he had not been good company.

Francis held a special appreciation for what he called “holy laughter.” He frequently played the role of a jester; it was part of his personality, his spirit. Why, after all, did so many people feel drawn to this man who insisted on living the life of a beggar? Because he taught a strict rule and put ashes in his potatoes? No, it was because he did everything—hard, crazy, wonderful things—with joy. He found color and vibrancy in nature. He danced in the meadows and in the streets. His life did not lack merriment.

Even his followers were known for their laughter. In the fourteenth century they found themselves under the close scrutiny of the watchdogs of the Inquisition. But it wasn't their poverty alone that made them suspect—they also laughed too much.

A third human need is for festivity.

Many Christians fear that festivity requires indulging in worldly pleasures. We radicals shun parties and good times, nervous about becoming

entangled in the snares of materialism. The latter fear is not illegitimate.

But I am discovering more and more that we can have festivity without selling out to Mammon, without embracing the greedy trappings of a consumer culture. Chrysanthemums brought from a garden on a frustrating afternoon can keep me going for days. A candle from a Kentucky friend, burning next to me as I write, works miracles in my heart. My niece's drawing with rainbows and balloons and "I love you" gives me the strength to plunge into a dreaded project. Festivity does not take much forethought or work; nor does it take much money, if any at all.

Which brings me to Fezziwig. If you have not read Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* every December until you can quote it verbatim, let me introduce you to this jolly old guy.

Fezziwig appears in the second stave of Dickens's story, when the Ghost of Christmas Past is guiding Scrooge through his miserly times gone by. When they reach the warehouse where Scrooge was apprenticed, that "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner" cries out in great excitement: "Why, it's old Fezziwig! Bless his heart, it's Fezziwig alive again!"

Scrooge then observes his former self reveling in one of the most joyous parties ever given. The whole community has been invited by Scrooge's friend and is enjoying the festivities—even the boy suspected of stealing and the one who had his ears boxed by his master. Food is plentiful, merriment and music are abundant, and old Fezziwig is the life of the party.

The Ghost of Christmas Past turns to Scrooge, who has been ecstatic during the merrymaking, and says scornfully, "A small matter to make these silly folks so full of gratitude."

"Small!" exclaims Scrooge, sounding more like his former self than the miser he has become, as if he cannot believe his ears.

"He has spent but a few pounds of your mortal

money. Is that so much that he deserves this praise?" asks the Ghost. "It isn't that," replies Scrooge. "It isn't that, Spirit. He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up; what then? The happiness he gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune."

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Fezziwig grasps a crucial secret. A simple employer but not a wealthy one, he knows how to spend a few pounds and provide a delightful evening. And through him Scrooge begins to understand this truth. At the end of *A Christmas Carol*, the reformed miser is giddy with happiness, the joy of being alive, and the fun of giving and sharing. He embraces Fezziwig's secret.

It was Jesus' secret too. In my search for a responsible Christian lifestyle I have one disagreement with Francis, who said that Christ was a beggar and that therefore he, Francis, would be a beggar. While it is true that Jesus had no home of his own and relied on the hospitality of others for food or shelter, our Lord was not ascetic. Yes, Jesus lived simply. He was a carpenter's son from a poor village during the Roman occupation. Yet the more I look at him, the more I see—parties! Jesus dined with Pharisees; he accepted as a follower Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy and prominent member of the Sanhedrin. And he went to lots of parties—his first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding reception! Jesus knew how to celebrate friendship; he knew how to celebrate living.

Richard Foster, in *Freedom of Simplicity*, says that true biblical spirituality affirms the goodness of material things. In Genesis 1, after creating each material thing, God proclaims, "That's good!" Asceticism, on the contrary, suggests an inherent corruption in the physical world; it is neither Hebrew nor Christian in its origin and might be accused of having Gnostic overtones.

Look at how Jesus describes the end of time as the wedding feast of the Lamb. It's going to be a big, eternal party! But if we become hung up on sacrifices and giving up things and scrutinizing others so that they do not enjoy themselves too much, we may not know what to do when we get to the Big Party. We'll be like the unprodigal son who refuses to go to his father's feast because there's a brother there who doesn't deserve the celebration.

As disciples of Jesus, we follow a path that avoids both asceticism and bad stewardship. We seek to live responsibly, fully caring for all our neighbors sharing this globe. We cannot hoard the provisions we have, as if to say, "I'm not sure about God's care and whether this will be available to me later. I'd better keep some in store." If we are to be free, we must let go of the fear that grace for tomorrow's needs may not be forthcoming.

Simple living, we must remember, is a gift, a new freedom. If we express our simple-living values with an arrogant, egotistical manner and continually compare ourselves with others, our actions may be correct, but the root of our discipleship is shallow or misplaced. When our inner conversion is not well-rooted in the gospel, simplicity becomes an unbearable burden to ourselves and those around us. But when we accept simple living as a gift, we are able to see money as a good resource to use for the

Kingdom's work—but also a potentially dangerous tool, not to be sought for our own uses. We will learn to throw our party without using the goods that were intended for the needs of the household.

How do we maintain this balance? How do we throw a party, or join in the festivities, and still be responsible for the needs of the household? In Fezziwig and Francis we glimpse the joy to which our Lord calls us: they loved people and friendship and good company. They danced through life in spite of suffering and they embraced it all—the tears as well as the joy. Francis danced in the rain and lived with social outcasts; Fezziwig threw a big party and made life a little more pleasant for his community, while rebuffing the word “exclusive.” They remind us of Jesus, who invited the forgotten people in the nooks and crannies to be his guests. They knew how to celebrate without shutting their eyes to the terribly real pain all around them.

I want to live my life their way. You can have the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the ascetics, the watchdogs of the Inquisition, the new legalists. I want to center myself in an authentic inward journey that will enable me to laugh in the midst of my pain. I want to serve the hopeless in a way that will not scare them away from the true gospel. I want to celebrate the simple life—not endure it.

NOTE

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KATIE COOK

edits Hunger News & Hope and Sacred Seasons for Seeds of Hope Publishers, and Baptist Peacemaker for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. She is a postulant in the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans and lives in Waco, Texas.