

August 18, 2020

*“May every person I come in contact with feel your presence in my soul, Jesus. And let me leave off your fragrance everywhere I go, Jesus.”* Mother Theresa

When I arrived at my first church right out of seminary, I met a youngish member of the church who attended probably once every 3 months. He had many reasons for not coming to Church – doubts about God and uncertainty about theology and doctrine.

He lived in Reynosa and taught school there. I was fascinated by Reynosa and all of the orphanages in the city. He helped me visit every orphanage (more than 25 orphanages). We made a detailed list of the orphanages, directions to the orphanages, and contacts at the orphanage. One day we were talking about faith and he mentioned a conversation he had had with a priest. He was asking the priest about a book written by Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong.

The priest immediately instructed him to destroy the book. He declared Bishop Spong evil and his book heresy. My new friend was troubled by this abrupt response and asked me my opinion.

I realize Bishop Spong is very controversial and a lot of his theology is “way-out-there” if not heretical. But I told my friend to continue reading the book if he found it engaging. I’m not much of a believer in “burning” books. If Bishop Spong can write a book that literally destroys the Christian faith then it’s better to find out the fragility of my faith now rather than later. I believe that God can handle a heretical book and will often turn its bad intentions into something good. There will always be false prophets or perhaps well-meaning Bishops whose opinions are misplaced or are before their time. Typically, their controversial writings or preachings make us stronger when we are forced to re-examine what we believe and why we believe it.

I tell you this story because of our podcast today.

I enjoy listening to and reading the books of Shane Claiborne. Some of the things he talks about I agree with and other things make me shake my head.

He is controversial but also respected.

He is friends with the Archbishop of Canterbury and a friend of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. In his conversation with Bishop Curry, Claiborne says “We read the Sermon on the Mount, we read the words of Jesus and we say ‘What if he really meant that stuff?’” Shane Claiborne is faithfully walking the path and living “that stuff” of which Jesus spoke.

Claiborne told some fascinating stories.

One was about his desire to work with Mother Theresa. He recalled calling the Missionaries of Charity only to have the phone answered by my Mother Theresa. He asked her if he could intern there and she instructed to “come on out here.” He also talked about one of the prayers Mother Theresa prayed before beginning their day: “May every person I come in contact with feel your presence in my soul, Jesus. And let me leave off your fragrance everywhere I go, Jesus.”

He also talked about his work against the death penalty and as he says “What it means to work for an executed Savior.” I had never thought in the terms of Jesus receiving the death penalty in the sense of Jesus being sentenced to death by the government for a crime he did not commit.

I don’t mind having my beliefs challenged or thinking about issues in new and different ways. I truly believe that most of my spiritual growth has come from reading the Bible or engaging in study because of listening to or hearing someone else’s “wild” beliefs.

So, I encourage you to listen to Shane Claiborne even though each of us will probably be tempted to turn off the podcast at one point or another.

Our last podcast is actually going to be on Day 41 (1 extra bonus day) when Richard Rohr speaks with Bishop Curry. Richard Rohr who is beloved by so many people is also the subject of criticism and boycotts of his books. Our world today quickly picks apart anyone who boldly takes a stance. Critics examine every word, phrase, and implication and then spit out a condemnation. It seems that if a book were to be published that would satisfy all of the critics it would have a series of blank pages with no title. Even then, someone would most likely protest the type of blank paper that was used.