

First Things Second - The Loss of All

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Hebrews 13:10-17, Matthew 22:31-40

It has been so good to see you, and to meet some of your new brothers and sisters. I miss you, more than you can imagine. However, the sting is far less than in other parishes I have left, because Chip & Heather are here to lead you on. In rare moments I get to thinking maybe even they aren't quite perfect: but then when was I ever? So I rejoice. Mostly I rejoice when I think of this band of faithful pilgrims – still eager and willing to walk the Christian WAY.

I do enjoy living in Port Townsend, immensely. Wonderful to have more time with Mariana. My family is truly wonderful. My daughter, her new husband, and their two teenage daughters live about five blocks up the hill from us. My son and his family live an hour down the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Even my sister is only a couple of hours north of us. Prayer and the Scriptures still light my life. Wasn't sure how that would seem once away from the demands of the pastorate. But I love it more than ever.

And now: well, it feels like I have been talking for about thirteen days straight. What else could I possibly have to say to you? And yet, in the wake of these past three years, it feels like some things have come clearer to me than they ever were before. So there are a couple of things I hope I can get clear enough for you to hear. I know you will hear them if you can. You have always been wonderful to preach to. So here we go.

I deeply regret the demise of Congregationalism. Three times in my life I fought the fight to have a local congregation vote to join the United Church of Christ. I thought the UCC was the best chance we had for preserving the Congregational heritage and moving toward ecumenicity at the same time. Too much history to go into here about how all that turned out. And those who stayed out of the UCC haven't been doing any better, by the way. But no other form of Christian Life honors the principles of freedom, individual responsibility, and community autonomy like Congregationalism does. These same themes are familiar and peculiar to the United States as well as to Congregationalism. But then their histories are intermingled and they spring from the same roots. Of course, we may be losing the values and approaches of our nation, just as we have lost the values and approaches of Congregationalism. But that's another story. Let me attempt a brief comment on what to me are huge but mostly hidden issues.

If you are a credal church, and that would take-in about 90% of Christendom: If you are a credal church, then the emphasis inevitably ends up focused on what you believe, and whether you believe it correctly. The correct way to believe is already established, already set forth, and already locked-down in the creeds. You only have to find or pretend your way into this correct belief by agreeing with the creeds.

Congregationalism is not merely non-creedal – it is anti-creedal. It claims that no creed can fully explain or adequately define the glory of God, or the essence of Jesus, or indeed any of the mysteries of the relationship between us and God. So the emphasis is not on believing correctly. It is a relationship: an adventure – a pilgrimage – and it is full of endless surprises. Nothing depends upon our getting it right on some mental level. The important thing is the relationship itself, and the Path or WAY we walk together. As with all relationships, TRUST is the core and key. In our relationship with God – trusting God's love for us is the core and key.

Of course any credal person would instantly remind me that God's truth does not change. How typical. And that person thinks this means he can stay safe in his little creed, and be comforted in the realization that I am wrong and do not believe correctly. In a former day he could even have me burned at the stake to further reassure himself about how true and correct the creeds are. But Congregationalism is full of words like pilgrim, and pilgrimage. It is constantly a journey – an exploration – and we never get it right in any final or absolute way. God's truth does not change, but human understanding and response changes constantly. To get something fully and finally right in this broken realm is ultimately a great insult. Once I get perfect, there is no more possibility for growth or learning or changing. And nothing can ever get any better. But that is ridiculous, you say? Quite right! Then why build churches that pretend it is not ridiculous – that claim there is such a thing as orthodox views: right belief. Lock it down, box it up, and everybody think the same. One size fits all. Jesus is just the big cookie-cutter in the sky. And free will, if there is such a thing, was God's biggest mistake.

Do I really think I will be saved because I believe everything correctly? Do I think God will be required to love me if

I can just believe correctly? Yet I am constantly running into “Christians” who are trying to convert or save me by getting me to agree to the right or correct opinions and beliefs about everything. Doesn’t the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus reveal that God’s love and grace and mercy are primary to and come way ahead of anything we do or believe? That changes everything, if we ever feel it – experience it. The whole focus changes, from the inside out. It is no longer about “Do we believe rightly?” It is about “Do we trust God?”! If we trust God, we go with God. We are in a relationship, and no relationship is ever static. No relationship is ever “perfect” – that is, frozen, static, unchanging. Isn’t anybody here married? Perfect is not a good thing. Perfect is seven layers and seven dimensions below the joy and blessings and adventure of a true relationship – a real pilgrimage.

What is holding the church hostage in our time? That is, what is preventing it from being the most exciting and demanding and rewarding Path that anybody can take in this life? Do you know a lot of people who wake up every morning so excited and energized that they can hardly contain themselves because ... because they get to live another day in the great adventure of the Christian WAY, and because they have brothers and sisters who are also walking this WAY? I do know some – a few. I knew quite a few of them around here. But that is not the flavor or attitude of the vast majority of Christians I run into. It is not the flavor of most of the churches I visit either. What is holding the church away from its true nature and Way and Life?

The virgin birth, the second coming, and the constructs about Hell have us all sidetracked. But you have heard me on such subjects before. Time to add another. The church has been hijacked by Athanasius, via the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. The vast majority of Christendom is still hostage to this fourth-century battle over orthodox views. And every Sunday, most of the people who want to be part of the Christian Faith are led to recite the words of these creeds, one or the other. So these creeds now carry far more weight, more emphasis than any of the words of the Bible. And if anybody thinks outside the borders and constructs of these creeds, the following Sunday it all goes right back to the “same old, same old.” When it comes time for Confirmation in most of these churches, all the young Christians are taught that they must affirm the creeds in order to join the church, and in order to be true Christians.

Over and over I have been told: “Look, we all know that this is merely a formality. It’s a togetherness thing. And it’s a humility thing. I mean, these words have been honored and sacred down through the centuries, so

why should we make a fuss? It’s only a symbol of our faithfulness and obedience. And maybe it’s good for us not to be so individualistic. Just swallow your pride, say the creed, and come be part of us.”

How very rational, and tempting, and appealing. So I swallow hard, and finally tell my side of it.

These creeds begin with the phrase, “I believe.” We are in a worship service – having come together, we say, in the presence of God. It would be blasphemous in any context, but in this sacred context I am going to knowingly lie my head off, deceive my Christian friends, perjure my soul, and say to God that I believe things I not only do not believe, but think are seriously against the truth that Jesus came to reveal to us? Maybe that’s fine with some people, but that is not okay with me, and I don’t think it should be okay with anybody.

Sometimes I muse to myself: What would the church be like if Christians could trust each other to say what they mean, to tell the truth, to be honest? Does this not remind us of something Jesus taught us? “Let your yea be yea, and your nay be nay.” (Matthew 5:37) Would this change the trust level? Would this put us back into a fellowship of power and dynamism? If I knew the people around me were being straight, sincere, and honest, would that not be a source of courage and encouragement? How serious is it that the Christian church teaches its people to say things they do not really mean; to pretend things they do not really believe; to make affirmations and promises which they have no intention of taking seriously or building into the way they live, or choose, or respond to life and to each other? If there is no honor – no trust – most of the good stuff leaks away before we have any chance to experience it.

What do you think holds the church hostage in our time? That is, what tricks does Satan use to keep us from the Life Jesus invites us into? Well, Satan has more than one trick up his sleeve. Some of it is over-busy schedules, and trying to accomplish too much because we don’t really believe that God is on duty. Most of our problems trace back to some form of pride or idolatry. We try to play God, or we put false values and false hopes in the place of God. It makes it hard to get our priorities straight. But since I left you, I have added one more item to Satan’s list of tricks. Among the things that hold the church hostage in our time are the creeds, and creedal approaches. They breed lies, and a subtle apostasy. It ends up with us thinking that what we believe is more important than who we trust. Good theology comes out of our experience in relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Shall we finally dare to say it: Authentic relationship with Jesus never comes from good theology – that is, it does

not come from our thinking correctly or having the right answers. It comes from experiencing Jesus' Presence, His caring – and our deciding to trust Him more and more because of that experience.

Does this not match our reality? There may be exceptions, but I don't know of them. Mostly Jesus picks us up when we are desperate. Jesus made the point often: He comes for the lost. Those who are well have no need of a physician. Nobody comes dancing and singing to the Cross.

One more comment about creedalism. It breeds the mind-set of the orthodox against the heretics. The orthodox are those who think correctly – those with right opinions, right views. Suddenly the mind-set is no longer about Jesus coming for us sinners: it is about the orthodox against the heretics; it is about the right thinkers versus the wrong thinkers. And the orthodox must discredit, banish, or burn the heretics. Heretics challenge the correct beliefs, and therefore cannot be allowed or tolerated.

That's very interesting because, you see, all of my heroes are heretics. Martin Luther was one of the great heretics of history. It was an official designation, by the Pope himself. Luther tried to be a good and obedient son of the church, but ended up challenging nearly all of the orthodox assumptions of his time. He was an outlaw most of his mature life, and escaped being burned as a heretic by the narrowest margin. That is, Luther died from intestinal problems just days before he would have finally been incarcerated and carried off to stand trial for heresy. There is zero chance that he would have been acquitted. Far from perfect, Luther is still one of my favorite heroes. I cannot begin to tell you how much I admire and respect him.

The Apostle Paul was also one of the greatest heretics in history. The orthodoxy of his time and context was all on the side of the High Priest, the Pharisees, the traditions of Moses and the Law. In the third chapter of Philippians, Paul lines out his impeccable credentials as one of the orthodox. But in verses seven and eight, he says, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish [skubalon – garbage], in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him" Do you know how badly the orthodox wanted to stone Paul? They even did it once but made a poor job of it, back in Lystra toward the tail end of the First Missionary Journey. During Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, more than forty upstanding, orthodox, very religious men took an oath to neither eat nor drink until they had murdered Paul. (Acts 23:12-

14) How do I know they were upstanding, religious men? Because they went to the chief priests and elders, told them their plan, and enlisted their help to get Paul brought out into the open. But Paul had a sister, and his sister's son reported the plot to Paul, and then to the Roman Commander. That saved Paul's life ... at least that time in Jerusalem.

Of course, the greatest heretic of all time was Jesus of Nazareth. His challenges to the orthodoxy of His time were so astounding and far-reaching that it could not be contained within Judaism as anybody knew it. A new world religion was born. And Jesus was crucified for His blasphemy – at the behest of the orthodox of His time. There was no help for it. Either Jesus broke beyond the borders of Jewish orthodoxy, or He could not save us – could not invite us into a Kingdom and a WAY far beyond all the right and correct beliefs that surrounded and controlled the most religious people of His day.

Are you a heretic? If not, how can you possibly consider yourself to be a follower of Jesus? Perhaps you are a follower of Caiaphas, or of the Pope, or of Athanasius, or of some well-worked-out religious organization. But if you are a follower of Jesus, you are a heretic. Jesus never fits into the orthodoxies of our time, or of any other time on earth. Therefore His followers must always and ever be engaged in renewal; in understanding His Message afresh; in being alert and alive and awake to the Spirit's influence, pleading, and guidance.

To be sure, not all heresy is faithful. Some of it is faithless, arrogant, ignorant, or just angry at God or the church. But without heretics, how can God move us forward – move us to renewal – move us to fresh new insights? How else can we ever address our errors or mistakes? Did the church love Copernicus, Charles Darwin, women's rights, gay rights, anti-slavery, social reform, any reform? If left to the orthodox, we would still be living on a flat earth, and stoning or burning anybody who disagreed with us.

The faithful heretics are essential to the renewal and growth of the church. That is also one of the reasons I so regret the demise of Congregationalism. It is embodied in one of Congregationalism's most famous sayings: "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Holy Word." And for us, the "Word" is never merely print on a page – it is never just the Bible. It is a living Word – a Word made flesh. The Word is not the Bible. The WORD is Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord. The Bible only points toward the real WORD.

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I regret the demise of Congregationalism. But last I knew, there were some vestiges of Congregationalism around

here. And there are pockets of it left in numerous other places, mostly unseen, even in the UCC. A remnant shall remain: People who trust the Holy Spirit more than the structures and frameworks of human institutions. People who really believe that relationship is greater than Law, and that Covenants are greater than Creeds. People who believe that a community of free individuals in covenant with Jesus and with each other is a higher priority than outward success, or the trends of a secular society going on all around them.

So I thank my God each time I think of you. And I pray that you will continually find the Presence and blessings of God far more appealing than all the allures of Satan's glitter and tricks. And that you will continually find the challenges and joys of being faithful heretics more to your liking than all the subtle fears and threats of the orthodox.

A good place to stop, but I'm not quite finished – and not sure when I will be back. So I want very much to remind you to keep putting first things first. In our time, almost across the board, our churches – especially the so-called mainline churches – have dispensed almost entirely with the First Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.”

We cannot take the second step first. For almost 4,000 years, people have been trying to live by the Ten Commandments. But they jump around to what they need or want. They do not work the First Commandment with any depth or earnestness, and so the others crumble on them at very inopportune times. “I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.” That is the First Commandment among the Ten. If we ever get that one right, the others come into view in a very different way.

Jesus has been asked for a summation beyond the Ten. He replies: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” It is a restatement of the First Commandment among the Ten. It gives us further hints about where the first one will lead us if we are truly willing to go with it.

Then Jesus goes on: “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Very true, beautiful, and necessary. But it is still the Second Commandment. [Commandment = “word” or “message”] In general, this second “word” is a summation of the last eight of the original Commandments. And the truth is, if we do not take the First Commandment completely and totally to heart, we have no chance to live by Jesus' Second Commandment. That is the truth, but not a very widely known truth.

In most mainline churches in our time, we hear endlessly about the Second Commandment – to love your neighbor – and almost nothing meaningful or sincere about the First Commandment: to love the Lord your God. So we get endless patterns of counterfeit love, of codependency, of blatant human idolatry: putting spouse, children, bosses, and even friends ahead of God. And in many quarters, the First Commandment is not only ignored, but mocked. (“Who needs all this God stuff? Just love your neighbor.”)

Even in the New Testament, it has already begun. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (I John 4:20) Doubtless there is a partial truth there. Any of us can get annoyed by people who pretend to be spiritual, yet seem to have no real caring for those around them. But if we do not love God, we have no hope of loving our neighbor. Apart from God, a neighbor is only what we need or want them to be; all true dimensions of love fade into insignificance. For as John himself would say, “God is love.” (I John 4:8,16) And God is the source of all true love. Actually, John also says this in the very same chapter. (I John 4:7) And most of the time John would be one of the first to remind us that very little of our Path depends on what we can see. Our hope, our faith, and our love are all based on realities beyond the physical, temporal, visible world. We do not “see” God, but God's Presence is often more real, more powerful, and truer for us than anything we do see.

First things first. First steps first. First Commandments first. Whenever we start to panic because there is too little time, or too little energy, or too few resources, it is always because the priorities are getting fuzzy. And that means some subtle or not-so-subtle form of idolatry is creeping into our affairs. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.”

The worst thing that happens to us when we start focusing on the Second Commandment without remembering the First is that we start thinking that life is about “our love” – and about how loving we are, and how much we can help people with our love. “We love because he first loved us.” Another little gem from John, also from the same chapter. (I John 4:19) If we love God, we come more and more to love our neighbors because God loves them. Our love is only piggy-backing on the true and genuine source of all love. The more we focus on the First Commandment, the more the Second Commandment becomes inevitable, and inescapable. Only, not because it is a good idea, or commendable, or noble, but because it is the love of God

that fills us, and spills over onto our neighbors. It is not our love that we want to carry; it is God's love that we want to carry. That leaves us no room or reason to brag or boast – only room to be grateful. Grateful for the love-bond – the personal relationship we have with God. God loves us first. That is what makes everything else about our Path possible.

Thanks be to God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.