

Lecture #4
The Congregational Way of Life

“THE CROSS FOR 21ST CENTURY CONGREGATIONALISM”

The great Congregational Theologian of the early 20th Century, P.T. Forsythe, of England, wrote one of many wonderful books of theology on *The Cruciality of the Cross*.

The very title said “The cross is crucial. The cross is absolute. The cross is essential. Without the cross there is not Christianity.”

For the cross is what God came to do, in Jesus. Together. To let history’s hate, human sin, all the selfishness and vengeance of humanity’s angry and frightened spirit sweep Him there, to face the terrible moment of death - and give it meaning, give it power.

Last Friday night I sat down to write this particular address to you. It was an historic day in Minnesota. It was a day of infinite sadness. It was a day of sudden grief – from the mines and bogs of the Iron Range, to the rolling farmland of southern Minnesota, from the headwaters of the Mississippi to the towers and commerce of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

For that morning, in a little King Air twin engined plane bearing his wife and daughter, three campaign aides, and tow pilots, Minnesota’s dynamic little Democratic Senior Senator, Paul Wellstone, on his way to the funeral of the father of a Minnesota Legislator, went down, in cold and sleet, in one of those northern Minnesota bogs.

A dear black gospel singer friend in California telephoned in tears. Others have written – all reaching out, in the face of something we don’t understand, something dark and inexplicable in our lives, to just touch each other, and to be reminded that we are real, that we are still there, that we care, and that we will go on.

I speak of that because in a way it was a day under the Cross. It was a deeply-caring, controversial politician – one of the few true populists of our time, going to do something he didn’t need to do, something personal for a friend: and in the process, laying down his life. When I went to our office alone the next afternoon to complete the writing of this address, a letter had come from a friend from the long years at Colonial Church. It said:

“I am grieving the death of Paul Wellstone today and what that loss means for our representation in Washington. It has always amused me,” she goes on. “That the little Jew from Northfield has consistently asked the questions (I believe) Jesus might have asked the national leaders. Unafraid of appearing foolish or unsophisticated, he made me proud of his voice in the wilderness.”

She enclosed a little check to support our global work of reconciliation.

She said “I reread your letter from last summer and am inspired to support some of the good guys in a modest way. Just to let you know that some of us notice and appreciate your good work.”

I quote this friend, because behind her broken heart, and behind that day of death for us Minnesotans, stands the Cross of Jesus. Jesus Who came to die for us. Jesus Who said His task was to lay down His life for the world. And who said: THAT IS THE GREATEST LOVE. Love's greatest act, which gives Love its fullest meaning. "Greater love has no one than this. That he lay down his life for his friend."

He calls us too, to that act. He calls His Church to that spirit. That giving up and laying down spirit. That throwing it all away spirit. For the greatest good. The simplest thing: LOVE, LIVING WITH LOVE. Holding nothing back.

When I went to the Colonial Church in 1962 – certainly not knowing I would serve there for 32 years, I took Paul's word as the text and theme for my ministry. "I am resolved" he said to the Corinthians, "to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

He would not declare the "success Gospel," or the "Name it and claim it" gospel, or the "successful living" gospel, or the Jesus as the greatest teacher, or Jesus as just a prophet, or Jesus as simply the best man, gospel. But Jesus of the Cross. Jesus dying and Jesus rising – that strange act of giving, for love's sake, that has been the world's one great force for redemption – forward and back – ever since. Every darkness, every death, every tragedy – like last Friday, or September 11th 2001, or the awful shooting from the trees, has a different meaning, a deeper meaning, in the world where Christ died for God's children.

In our little three-day healing retreats with grieving, guilty broken Church leaders in Rwanda, it was the sight of Jesus on the Cross saying "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," that is always the turning point for our friends. "If Jesus" they say, "with all they were doing to Him, could say, even as they pounded nails into His hands, 'Father forgive them,' then I too, can forgive."

And they come from those three days apart with Jesus, ready to do just that: to go to those they know as the murderers of their own family, and say "It is over between us. I forgive you."

I came to see the power of the Cross in a way I do not think I had ever understood it in my 40 years as a parish minister, and I have wondered out loud, and asked myself over and over "Did I really preach the Cross in all those years, when I had the chance?"

I can only pray that I did. For I see now, that – it is the Cross that is the absolute center of the Christian faith and the Christian message.

The crucified Christ is the pattern for our life and the essence of our message to the world.

So, I want to be sure I bring it here, this week end, when we are concerning ourselves with what FAITH means in this great tradition of the Congregational Way which we have inherited from our Pilgrim Ancestors.

I WANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE RECENT AMERICAN CONGREGATIONALISM'S STRUGGLE OF FAITH

And I do mean recent. It was not the struggle of our 17th century Pilgrim and Puritan forebear's struggle. Their struggle was with authority – with church authority and government authority.

They pored over the New Testament, and looked at the vital life of the first century church and said “Now here is authority!” Here is what church authority is. It's Jesus, alive in the midst of His people. We need to be free of these external, human authorities, so we can be obedient – without any hindrances – to Christ alone. They said “Christ is our King.” Jesus is Lord and no other. And it was Jesus' death and resurrection that proved Who He was and gave Him the right to be King, to be the Lord, and so to have authority over their lives.

Those young separatists of Scrooby knew that. The issue was never for them: “Is Christ divine? Is He fully God and fully man?” He was that. That's why He could do what He did, and be what he was. That's why He rose with hope and healing in His wings.

Now, I know the NA Fellowship goes back and forth between Liberal and Orthodox ideas of Christ and the Bible.

And, God knows we will have differences, in how we will see life and politics, and church and world. But what the Biblical story cries out to us, is that, for all and whatever our differences, Jesus is the center. And Jesus' last, terrible Journey to Jerusalem – weeping over the rebellious city God loved – and laying down his life: accepting betrayal and all the rest, is THE HEART OF WHAT WE HAVE FOR OUR LIFE, AND OUR CHURCH'S LIFE, AND OUR CHILDREN'S LIFE.

For: It is the resurrected Christ who is still among us today.

The Christ who heals people.

The Christ who answers prayer.

The Christ who loves the world, and lights the dark, and changes the equation so that Hope comes,

and dawn rises,

and real things, miraculous things – HAPPEN.

And look – it is the congregation, the two or three gathered week by week in Jesus' Name, that is the place where real things of faith actually happen. As Jesus himself said “Tell John that the sick are healed, the dead are raised, the kingdom of God is preached!”

It is here that the world changes. People change. New realities invade our lives. The world itself turns over: IN CHURCH. In the Congregation. Not in the Vatican. Not in denominational offices, but here among the people.

II

IT SEEMS TO ME ESSENTIAL THAT THIS WORK OF THE CROSS NOT BE LOST TO CONGREGATIONALISM, NOR TO ALL CHRISTIANITY.

Being free, being independent, sharing uncommitted fellowship is nothing, compared to the wonder, the miracle, the power of the Cross of Christ.

A good man, a great saint, a magnificent teacher, is nothing compared to a Lord who dies for us.

And all these things are acted out, are shown forth, are made real in the Congregation.

It's in the congregation where we pray for each other and love each other, and serve each other. This is where we feed each other – and wash each others feet. Where we are just simply together.

The great gift of our Way – is the congregation. The place, the gathering of the two or three together, where Jesus comes – by His own promise – and shows us his hands and side, and says “touch me”, and breathes upon us and says “Peace! Receive the Spirit.”

We are inheritors and preservers of this marvelous, miracle thing – the congregation as the FULLNESS OF THE CHURCH with the living Christ – crucified and risen – in our midst!

III

IF ANYTHING, CONGREGATIONALISM MUST CENTER ON THE CROSS IN THE YEARS AHEAD

Because ours is a tradition of the church which comes from a great renewing, rediscovery of the simple key to the essence and vitality of the FIRST CENTURY Church's amazing life: -- where, knowing the risen Christ in their midst, they lived a whole new life, “breathing bread from house to house, listening to the Apostles teaching, praying, preaching with power and praying in such a way that miracles happened. It is there in Acts...

- Also – we will be in tune with what God is already doing across the world in this new century. Christianity – not the Muslim way – is sweeping the world. Read the Atlantic September Cover Story on THE NEXT CHRISTIANITY. That “Next Christianity” is a return – all across the 2nd/3rd world, to the original primitive Christianity that was not dead and boring, but was alive and vital, changing the whole equation of life.
- More than that, the Theology of the Cross is THE AVENUE TO THE HUMILITY IN OUR LIFE AND SPIRIT THAT world Christianity today so desperately needs – and surely American Christianity, with its fads and temptations, so needs to find again. “The Cross is lifted o'er us” the hymn sings “We journey in its light. The crown awaits the conquest. Lead on, oh God of might!”

- Where real evil has been, where the forces of darkness are rife in our world – like the genocide countries of Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo – The Cross of Jesus is shining the light and giving hope: Just as Jesus said He would do.
- I Am the light of the world. And “you are the light,” He said.

And He means YOU ARE, HERE, against all the darkness that our world continually coughs up.

And I tell you – great systems, great denominational structures, great Ecclesiastical power centers (just like great business centers) are very unlikely to be shiners of the light.

But the places where the people gather, and where Jesus comes – will. You are one of those places – with such opportunity before you.

LIFT HIGH THE CROSS, my friends.
SHOW FORTH THE LORD.
SHINE THE LIGHT.
LIVE THE LIFE.

I believe that is our call!

And you'll see!

(Dated 11/1-3/2002)