

“At the Center - At the Cross”
I Corinthians 1:18-24
March 17, 2019

Do you consider your well-informed? If someone were to ask you your opinion or belief about, say, the chances for the NASDAQ exchange to reach a new record high by the end of the year, could you hazard a guess? How about the brewing trade war - no, not the one between the U.S. and China, but between Britain and the European Union?

Maybe finances and economics aren't your thing, so let's try a topic closer to home: could you speak intelligently about the role of the Church in social reform in the early 21st century? Or how about the current state of American theater and film - would you be well enough informed to give an answer that makes sense?

When I was growing up in Chicago we had four daily newspapers to choose from: the two morning papers were the Tribune on the political right, and the Chicago American on the center-left. The two afternoon papers were the very left of center Sun-Times, and the centrist Chicago Daily News. We were a Daily News family.

Well, the Chicago American fell on hard times, and to get its circulation back up, they ran radio ads that went something like this: two people at a cocktail party (you can hear the clinking of glasses in the background) are discussing the latest fashion, or movie, or debate in Congress. They then turn to a third person at the party and ask, “What do YOU think?” There then follows a lot of hemming and hawing, and then the announcer cuts in: “If only you had read today's morning edition of the Chicago American...”

Well, the Chicago American went under. As did the Daily News. This means, I guess, that Chicago is only half as well informed as it used to be. But if someone turned to you, and asked you about Christianity, what would you say?

I suppose you could hand them a Bible - you do carry one with you everywhere you go, don't you? - you could hand them a Bible and say, “Read this.” I don't think you'd be giving very encouraging advice: our pew Bibles run to over 1000 pages, and it's not the biggest type-face. You might be tempted to have them skip the Old

Testament, but that still gives them well over 200 pages of the New Testament to absorb. That certainly doesn't fit in the "twenty-five words or less" category that many people are looking for these days.

You might offer another suggestion: "Go and talk to our pastor about it. He should be able to give you a pretty good idea." But your inquiring friend might not be interested in looking me up. They might want to know, right then and there, what Christianity means to YOU, personally. After all, the pastor has professional opinions about religion, and your friend might want something less "bought and paid for."

How would you explain it? Would you say that Christianity helps you to live a better life? For that kind of answer, your inquirer might as well take a Dale Carnegie course in Positive Thinking, or go see a psychologist or a psychiatrist - all of which may be beneficial, I might add - but there's something more to Christianity than that.

Would you say that Christianity gives you an uplift, a motivation to do things and do them right? That makes Christianity sound a little like One-a-Day Multiple Vitamins with extra Iron. I'm all for uplift. It's great to feel good. But that is not what distinguishes Christianity from other groups or associations or forms of entertainment.

What WOULD you say?

The Church through the ages has wrestled with this problem of figuring out what is unique about Christianity, what it is that you can find HERE that you simply cannot find elsewhere. What is it that distinguishes a Christian from anyone else?

We can figure out from the way the Bible was written that the earliest statement about Christians *which we made about ourselves* was the simple and straightforward statement, "Jesus is Lord." Only a Christian could say that. A Jew wouldn't. A pagan couldn't. The philosophers might think about it, but would never utter it with any real conviction.

But what does that phrase, "Jesus is Lord," really mean? On what basis could someone proclaim it? People of faith came up with creeds and doctrines that described

what they believed, what they meant, and thus tried to define who we are. Some say that the phrase “Jesus is Lord” is actually the earliest creed of our faith. Since that time, we’ve come up with the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed ... there’s even a Kansas City Statement of Faith, believe it or not. That’s one which we Congregationalists came up with, in 1913. All on our own!

The problem with these formulas is that they have a way of being rattled off over and over again, and therefore lose their meaning, so much so that if your friend at the cocktail party asked you about your faith, I’m not sure that reciting a creed would carry much meaning - for either you OR your friend. You might as well hand your friend that 1,000 page Bible you’ve been carrying around with you ever since your confirmation. Or offer them the tuition for that Dale Carnegie course I mentioned a moment ago.

Seriously, none of those solutions will do. And that is because your inquiring friend is asking, “What is at the core of YOUR belief? What is at the center of YOUR faith?”

Some might say, “The center of Christian faith is the belief that God loves us, despite all our stupidities and shortcomings.” Now that’s a pretty good summary of Christianity, don’t you think? But to that I would like to ask, how does God show that love which the Apostle Paul wrote of so eloquently in I Corinthians 13?

Another possible answer might be, “The center of Christian faith is that even though we are not perfect, there is a world to come where we might spend eternity in the presence of a perfecting love.” But to that I might ask, “How are we made perfect?”

Yet another answer might be, “The center of Christian faith is the belief that no matter how bad things get, God will work everything to the benefit of those who believe.” But I might ask, “In this world of ours, what indication do you have that this is so? Where and when has God acted to take the most desperate situation imaginable, turned it to right, and then made it stick?”

Where DO we get the courage of our convictions? Where do we turn to in praise and thanksgiving? What is the symbol which is universal to all Christians everywhere, no matter what creeds they recite, no matter what kind of building they worship in, no matter who leads their worship, no matter what hymns or chants or songs they sing?

If Jesus had lived for his three score and ten, preaching around Galilee and Judea, doing good works, performing some unexplainable acts of wonder, what would have come of him? There were many religious teachers of that day, some of whom are remembered quite well. There's John the Baptist, who was martyred. We also can read of Rabbi Gamaliel, spoken of highly in the Book of Acts. There were also two other great Jewish leaders of that same century, Shammai and Hillel, from whom all modern Judaism is defined.

But Jesus was not John the Baptist. And Jesus was not just a Rabbi, revered but not worthy of worship. He was something more. And how do we know that he was something more? Others died the death of a martyr. Others have begun great religious movements, as did Buddha and Muhammad.

It is in the shadow of Calvary that we truly can see Jesus for who he is. It is on the hill of skulls that we realize that here was God, acting in love. It was in a hideous death that we can see God acting for good, even in the worst of situations. It was on a hill far away that all our imperfections were taken away and buried from God's sight.

There is that love which is found at the center of our faith. We don't need to lose ourselves in creeds or in combing through 1000 pages of the Bible, though creeds and scripture are certainly of benefit in building one's faith. But when it comes to the center of the Christian faith, the resurrection faith, the Easter faith, it's all there - at the foot of the Cross, where love divine, all loves excelling, is not only made plainly visible, but is made completely available to each and every one of us.

Let us pray: