

A Theology of the Cross - Part 2

The environmental crisis--especially global climate change--has reached such a point that it is no longer reversible and that considerable further damage to the Earth and us its people is inevitable. Yet very few people--even within the environmental movement--seem to be willing to acknowledge (at least in public) that fact. Along with [Part I](#) this sermon along with the lecture [Finding Hope in an Environmental Wasteland](#) explore some of the depth of the environmental crises and the forces that make them virtually invulnerable to the usual modes of attack, explores some possible reasons why the American "positive outlook" may be obstructing our view of reality. The two sermons also look at the Christian "theology of glory" and how Christianity may have played a historical role as well as an continuing role in our illusions. Finally all three begin to look at what hope might look like in our situation.

September 18, 2011

Last week we looked at our cultural commitment to a positive point of view and our faith in inevitable progress. And we looked at how they blind us to the momentous threat to our civilization from global climate change and other environmental crises.

This morning I'd like to move on from last Sunday to:

1. First, further explore the church's blindness to the shadow side of that faith in inevitable progress,
2. Second, distinguish between a "theology of glory" and a "theology of the cross,"
3. And third, look at how we might live out the true Christian hope as individuals and as a community.

Before I begin, though, let me say that I really struggle with all of this. On the one hand, I have three grandchildren and I'm heartsick over the world we're leaving to them. We've plundered their future and that's not only sinful but incredibly sad.

On the other hand, giving these teachings to you has made me very anxious. Pseudo-prophets have been predicting the end of the world forever, and here I am ... doing it again. Do I have it right? Is this just my depression speaking? Last Sunday before coming to church, I was so anxious that I was physically shaking. So this is hard for me, too.

The Church's Response

Last week I said that "scientific rationalism" is the doctrine that logic is the final criterion of truth. It refuses to consider that any other way of knowing could be equally valid. You might think that the Christian Church--with its commitment to a faith that transcends reason--could have been a balancing force to the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment. And superficially it has appeared to be just that, silencing Galileo, countering Darwin, and, in our time, opposing contraception and stem cell research and so on.

But that's only on the surface. Since at least the fourth century, the church has mostly been eager to adapt to whatever the dominant consciousness was and, in fact, to become cultural handmaiden to it and justify it. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, for instance, accommodating itself to its violence, domination, and inequality. The church upheld the social order of the Middle Ages, blessing the divine right of kings and the oppression of peasants. The German church supported Nazism. Until very recently in this country, the church (outside of a few small pacifist denominations) has supported every war that came along.

So when scientific rationalism became the dominant ideology in the 16th and 17th centuries, the church accommodated then, too, forfeiting its biblical conviction that it's not human understanding that can lead humanity into the reign of God, but only the pure grace of God. As the church moved in tandem with modernity, it reinterpreted its faith in Providence into a faith in Progress, with reason and human effort guiding the way. It was only a short step from progress to mastery, which replaced God-inspired mystery.

Even the fundamentalist church--which appears to reject a faith in scientific thought--has held on to the modernist faith in the individual's mastery of his own fate. Because I can assure my own salvation "by accepting Jesus into my heart," I'm still in charge. I don't have to deal with my powerlessness and the ensuing darkness.

But the Christian support--conservative or liberal--of the modernist perspective has left it theologically unprepared to deal with the shadow side of Enlightenment thinking: the meaningless wars, the environmental crises, the sense of despair and meaninglessness. The church is unprepared to offer much guidance in today's existential crises.

How many churches today even speak about the possibility that global climate change may bring unprecedented death and devastation? In the relatively few churches that even take the issue seriously--as I believe Eighth Day does--the mantra is that global climate change is real, it's very serious, and [quote] unless we take substantive measures [end quote], we face an unpredictable and dangerous future. Well, all that may be true, but there are few indications that humanity will take those substantive measures anytime soon; there's little recognition of how drastic the measures would have to be or the impact of those measures on our standard of living; and there's little recognition that no matter what we do, the destruction will most likely be severe, anyway. We're not going to hold this onrushing tide back, yet the church, like most of the rest of the culture, turns its gaze away.

One result is that those who suffer the existential anxiety of our time--that sense of meaninglessness and despair--won't usually find much help in the church. As long as the conservative church concentrates on personal sin and salvation and the liberal church assumes that humans can fix everything, Christianity won't be able to speak to the modern condition because it won't acknowledge it.

So that's my first point: The church has too eagerly embraced, and been blinded, by the modern commitment to rationalism and progress.

A Theology of Glory and the Theology of the Cross

My second point is that within Christianity there's a tension between two competing theologies, the "theology of glory" and the "theology of the cross." In the theology of glory, the Christian has direct access to the power and glory of God, and true faith leads inexorably to overcoming suffering and to success in life. An extreme example is the prosperity-gospel: Have faith in Jesus, and God will reward you with cars and homes, jobs and retirement accounts. We may be a little more sophisticated, but we're still caught in a slightly different brand of this theology, too: As long as we're faithful, we believe in our hearts, things will turn out okay.

It's not that the theology of glory is wrong; it has deep roots in the Gospel. We can in a real sense be part of the glory of God. The Reign of God will come.

But there's a distinct tension in the Bible between the promise of glory and the promise of deep suffering. For Martin Luther, the theology of the cross

discerns the presence of the omnipotent God not in manifestations of power and glory ... but, on the contrary, in the midst of peril, uncertainty, and suffering ... in short, where God seems altogether absent!" ... The true God is not the omnipotent monarch whose glory the religious attempt to reflect. To the contrary, the true God is willingly divested of power and hides under the opposite of what the world recognizes as omnipotence. ... The true Christian life ... is not a life of [security], lived out in the midst of a world in which the triumph of the good is assured. On the contrary, to enter upon such a [Christian] life is to be denied every form of security." [\[1\]](#)

That's Martin Luther ... who'd probably not be a popular preacher today.

So that's the second point: for the Christian there's always a tension between the light and the dark, the tension between glory and cross.

Let me stop here a minute to acknowledge that this analogy of light and darkness may be misleading. Actual, physical darkness is usually total, covering everything. But the theology of the cross has nothing in common with, say, a personal depression that blankets even the true joys in our lives: love, creation, relationships, and so on. Awareness of the world our grandson will have to face, for instance, didn't preclude my joy in playing with him these last few days.

Christian False Hope

So, what about Christian hope? Isn't hope the definitive reality of faith? Well, that's tricky, too. Certainly, the Resurrection is fundamental to the gospel faith, and it does speak of ultimate

hope. But we shouldn't confuse biblical hope with what we might hope for. God doesn't promise that we'll be able to hang on to our lifestyle. God doesn't even promise that civilization as we know it will survive. If that's the kind of hope we want, we shouldn't look to biblical Christianity. So, if I can't find real hope, I might ask myself what it is that I'm hoping for.

God doesn't promise to remove the darkness. God is the crucified one who is divested of power. God's sovereignty is contested until the end of time. God's promise is to offer light within the darkness, light to move us closer to the kingdom of God, light to find meaningful and joyful life even while the darkness persists. The contemporary Christian task is to waken ourselves and others from our repression of the despair in which we live--a sense of despair that our focus on progress has created. The special task of the church is to name the darkness without shrinking from it.

If it's dark, one says so.

In the book of Amos, we read:

"Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light ... pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?"
(Amos 5:20)

And yet, at the same time, the gospel holds out an expectation that God will, ultimately, triumph. It's a mystery that cannot be pinned down. It's not so much an intellectual understanding as an existential conviction that comes from standing in the darkness without hope of resolving it yet believing that there's a glimmer of light there, a glimmer I may not yet see.

Something we've learned at Joseph's House might help our understanding here. Most people who come to us are dying. We, of course, hope for their recovery ... and some few do recover. But the more important work at Joseph's House is to turn toward the suffering of the person in front of us, to acknowledge it, and to understand that we can't do much to relieve it. We sit at the bedside to be there in the presence of their suffering. Our real hope lies not in their cure but in our relationship and the healing may provide. Hope is of a different order from optimism.

That's the third point: there is a Christian hope even in the face of whatever's coming.

So What Do We Do?

So, finally ... what do we do? The theology of the cross is not ultimately a counsel of despair and passivity, but it is a theology that accepts doubt as part of the faith journey. We're so used to trying to fix things that we don't know what to do when fixing things is no longer possible. We're not able just to sit at the bedside.

So, let me offer a couple of thoughts:

- First, we can work to understand the direct connection between our faith in progress and the crises we face. That which has given us so much is now the problem. Our faith in progress, our belief that technology will find us a way out, our confidence that, somehow, we'll muddle through ... all blind us. As long as we're spellbound by affluence and human progress, we won't see the world as it is.
- Second, we can allow the experience of despair and helplessness to sink in. We're all children of the optimistic culture and there's work to do before we can even see clearly. No one, of course, can predict the future, but it does look bleak. I think we have to internalize the truth that there's nothing we can do to save us. That recognition is almost a pre-condition to actual hope.
- Third, we can work to educate others about the true darkness of the times. We Christians should be a people unsurprised by darkness. We don't seek it, but at this point in history we do expect it. The violence of 9/11 surprised most Americans, so it was easy to panic the nation into reacting militarily. If Americans been forewarned, unsurprised, might our reaction have been different? And now we sense the environmental darkness deepening. Might it help our societal response if others, too, could see it before the crisis event?

I know that none of this feels like "doing anything," but without a deeper understanding, our "doing something" will lack an anchor in reality.

But shouldn't we be involved in real action, too? What about feeding the poor and housing the homeless? What about advocating for social change? What about simple living and

lobbying for a cap-and-trade bill? Given what you've said, why should we do anything?

The reason we must do something is that we are co-creators with God. We must act because God loves the Creation, and we're made in the image of God. The important thing is not so much what we do but that we are called to do it and that we offer as gift to God. Even if our doing can't come out of our hope to banish the darkness, our work makes a difference. In other words, our action comes not out of fixing but of giving over to God for God's use.

On December 1st, 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the Montgomery bus, the realistic probability of that action changing segregation laws in the South was about zero. It would have been crazy to think that her actions would fix much, if anything. Many others had done similar acts of resistance with uncertain or even terrifying results. True, hers was not a solitary act of defiance but part of a carefully calibrated campaign crafted by local leaders. Nevertheless, her civil disobedience was still not a "fix" to anything. But God used Rosa Parks's action--in a long chain of unpredictable events--to transform the darkness into light. That's not a promise that God will clean up our mess, but it is a reminder of how actual miracles do happen.

The crises are here and more are coming. Conditions will become more challenging. But the ideas, the work, the structures of community, the relationships, the care of the earth: All that we offer now will be waiting, scattered around in various places ... available when God's time comes.

To those for whom hope still means optimism that things will turn out okay, whose primary reason for work is still to fix things, this hope we're offered seems pretty thin, indeed. But if we have eyes to see, there are signs of resurrection everywhere. Around the world millions of small groups--like most of you here--are working on small, sometimes tiny projects that offer glimmers of light to small corners of the Earth. There are millions of us spreading these tiny bits of hope all around, waiting. And while they don't dispel the darkness, these bits of hope provide us a community and a sense that others are ready, too. That may, in part, lift our sense of despair.

We come back to something that we in this community know well. We do that to which we're called, even if we have little idea of how our work will be used ... or even if it will be used. But we find our hope in bringing the call of our heart into the pain of the world. We find our joy in joining the work of creation.

Hope is doing what we're called to at this moment and recognizing that our being and doing in this world can be gifts to God. We can find our meaning not in fixing the crisis before us, but in offering our gifts that they may be used, as God's grace (not our works) moves us from the despair of Good Friday to the hope of Resurrection.

May it be so!



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[1] Hall, Douglas John, Lighten Our Darkness, p. 112