

Ecclesia Spiritus, Part 3: Ecclesia of Holiness

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Countryside Community Church

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In this series we have observed that the Christian church grew like wildfire in the opening centuries of Christianity – grew not only among Jews living in Palestine but even more so among pagans living throughout the Mediterranean world. It grew despite the enormous differences between Greco-Roman and Israelite culture, and it grew despite persecutions that would become more and more intense as the Roman government considered the Christianization of the Empire to be a greater and greater threat to its established way of doing things.

The reason why Christianity grew so fast during this time period had nothing to do with people being promised a “Get Out Of Hell Free” card if they believed in Jesus. After all, neither the Jews nor the pagans who were converting to Christianity held any notion that they were in danger of being sentenced to eternal punishment in a place like hell. No, that whole notion would not develop into a widely held belief until much later, once Christians had largely forgotten the real message of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. No, what was attracting people in droves was that Christians seemed a lot happier than the average population. Happier, freer, more compassionate toward each other, and more generous-spirited toward others.

Of course, one could find pagans and Jews who fit this description as well, and you could find Christians who did not. But on the whole, the buoyancy of Christians compared to others was so pronounced that people were drawn to this new religion like a moth to flame.

What made these Christians so buoyant was both a “head thing” and a “heart thing.” By “head thing” I mean they learned the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and they heard various ideas that they found compelling about the ongoing significance of Jesus’ story for themselves and the world. By “heart thing” I mean that, in community with fellow Christians, they were experiencing God in ways that words could not adequately describe. Indeed, these God experiences were so profound and set them into such a new and wondrous relationship with God that the early Christians came to believe that these kinds of experiences, leading to this kind of relationship with God, were exactly what Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were meant to point us towards.

This morning we have a number of high school seniors in our midst, many of whom are setting off on college or other adventures that will take them far from us. While these students have journeyed with us, we have been attentive to handing along the “head” part of Christian faith. In other words, we have told, and re-told, the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and we have offered them our best insights as to what the significance of Jesus may be for them and the world. Yet the “heart” part of Christian faith is something we could never teach them or hand on in a concrete way. As some say, the “heart part” must be caught, not taught. It is an experience, not a message.

Nevertheless, I want to leave our high school seniors with a story this morning that points beyond itself toward the kind of Christ-experience that I hope lies in wait for you as you embark on this stage of your journey. Perhaps if you will remember the story, you will eventually have the kind of experience to which the story points, if you haven't already. Then you will know why Christianity used to be so crazy attractive to folks, and still is to some of us.

This story is not one from the Bible, though it was created to illustrate biblical truth. The story is, actually, from the minister of the church I grew up in on Mercer Island, Washington (Rev. Bruce Van Blair). I heard it before going off to college, and in the coming years was immensely grateful to have heard it. Perhaps you will be similarly grateful someday – to Bruce, not to me. Here's Bruce's story (amended in some places by me):

Many years ago, the King of Greece was aboard an ocean liner en route to the United States for a conference with our President. Among the King's attendants was a woman who owned a big, beautiful mastiff, a dog that she prized greatly.

One day aboard ship, as the dog was racing playfully, he slipped on the smooth deck and went overboard. The attendant rushed to the captain's deck to tell the captain, in hopes that he might stop the ship and recover the dog. But the captain assured the woman that her dog was doubtless already dead from the ship's propellers, and that, in any case, he couldn't possibly stop an entire ocean liner, adding great expense and interrupting the King's schedule, just to save the life of one dog.

In reply, the attendant ran from the captain's deck and dove overboard. "Dog overboard!" had not been enough to stop the ship, but "Person overboard!" was. They stopped the ship, picked up the attendant and her dog, and resumed their journey.

Now, ask yourself: What was this dog's life worth? Even though this dog was a special breed and a magnificent specimen of his particular breed, clearly the dog's own worth was not judged high enough to save him in the eyes of the ship's crew, and would not be to this day in the eyes of most of the world. Unfortunate, regrettable, sad – yes. But the dog's value was not enough to stop the ship and so the dog lost even that value which he did have. In the waters of his drowning the dog's value was negated. He was lost.

But unknown to the captain, unknown to the crew, unknown to the passengers and even to the King of Greece, this dog was not worth the value of one dog. This dog happened to be, quite literally, equal in value to the worth of one woman. Why? Because a woman loved her dog, like a mother loves her child! The dog actually had nothing whatsoever to say about it. He could not have produced this extra value. He could not earn it or cancel it. Nor could he fully comprehend its power. But a woman's life was on the line for this dog, so this dog was equal in value to the worth of one woman.

At its apex, that is the meaning and message of the Gospel. The love of God always seemed like a theory or a sentiment – until One came who jumped in with us to share our fate. After that, it became clear that the universe itself must deal with us according to the value of the Son of God, regardless of what our own innate value might be. The universe cannot move on without us, unless it is willing to move on without Christ. We have Christ's value because he loves us –

and always and only because he loves us.

This is the thing we are always forgetting, if ever we can believe it in the first place. Your value is not the worth of one human being. *Your life is equal in value to the worth of the Christ of God!* He will not accept resurrection unless it is extended also to you. Ultimately, that is what the Cross is about – that is what it means.

Now I want to stretch our story a good bit. We have our dog rescued and back aboard ship. His master reassures him, telling him that he need not fear, that his being saved was no accident, and that he can depend upon and believe in this love that has saved him. Moreover (and here is the stretching), the master makes it clear that she loves all dogs in this same way. She loves all dogs this much! Of course, most of them have no knowledge or experience of it yet.

What happens next? Well, possibly the dog goes prancing around the decks with his nose so high in the air that he trips over ropes, bumps into doors, and gets in everybody's way. And perhaps he spends most of his time bragging to other dogs about how great he is and how they stopped an entire ocean liner just to save him.

This is not the recommended procedure, of course, but it happens often enough to give many people the impression that this is the basic meaning of Christian salvation, and that this is the inevitable attitude of those who believe in Jesus Christ.

There is another possibility, however, one that gets closer to how many of us might respond to being rescued by our Master.

Our dog is back on deck after his own ordeal and salvation. If we endow this dog with human feelings, we can sense that he is feeling a profound thankfulness and a greatly increased affection for his master. But that is not all. There would also be a nearly bewildered feeling of awe and amazement that the master loved him so much. At the same time, I suspect he would feel terribly chagrined and embarrassed to realize all the trouble and risk he had caused for his master by his carelessness. And he would promise himself a hundred times over that he would never be the cause of such trouble and danger for his master ever again.

That is our problem, incidentally, is it not? We don't walk around with our nose in the air. We walk around determined never to cause Jesus any more trouble. We don't realize that this is just as ludicrous a response to the Cross as sticking our nose in the air.

In any case, the whole experience could create a very cautious, careful, highly conscientious, and rather rigid lifestyle. I think this would make the dog's master very sad. That is, if the awareness of saving grace merely serves to destroy the joy that was between this dog and his master before, this would be a great sadness. No more romping and playing onboard ship. Everything forbidden, everything somber and serious and crucial and cautious – *sort of like some Christians*. What could the master possibly do with an attitude like that?

I suppose the master would understand, and pet the dog and try to reassure him back into joy and playfulness. And the dog would feel secure in this attention, but he would stay determined to prove his gratitude and worth by never giving the master cause for a moment's concern or

worry ever again.

And that is how it came to pass that Christian love died in the church. People decided to be good instead of loving. After that, the story never seemed very real, and it lost its impact on coming generations.

Most of the lost world stayed lost. And even those who knew about the Master's love began to speak of it as only a story to illustrate "spiritual truth" (translation: nothing to do with the real world). All the puppies heard the story at least once a year and got some extra bones to help them be happy about the wonderful story. But what all the dogs really believed was that you should never romp or play onboard ship because you might slip and fall overboard.

Perhaps the whole thing could have gone that way. And certainly too much of the real story did go that way – but not all of it. So back to our analogy for one last scene.

One day, while he was walking along in his very somber, correct, and most conscientious manner, the mastiff saw a little terrier scampering to get away from a boy who was chasing him with a stick. In his fear and flight, the little terrier slipped on the smooth deck, and out into the cold waters he went. The boy looked around quickly and, seeing that no one was watching, ran away.

The poor mastiff was in a terrible quandary. He had sworn to himself a thousand times that he would never again cause his master any trouble. Moreover, his master was nowhere in sight, nor was he at all sure what the master would do in this situation, since this terrier didn't go to his church. Besides, the boy was chasing him with a stick; maybe the terrier had been bad and deserved it.

Yet the mastiff himself had been over the side and alone in the dark, cold sea. The sight of another in that same plight brought it all back in full living color, and it flooded through him in an instant, dashing all of the high and careful resolves that he had been reciting and maintaining. The mastiff gave one thunderous bark and, with a bound, sailed over the rail and out into the sea.

"What are you doing here?!" the terrier asked in astonishment. "You always walk the decks so carefully and properly, I don't see how you could have slipped."

"I came to wait with you until the ship comes back to pick you up," replied the mastiff.

"Don't be stupid," said the terrier. "No ship is coming back for either one of us."

"That's true," agreed the mastiff. "But it will come back to pick up my master."

"Master?!" cried the terrier. "There's no master here – just two drowning dogs!"

"She'll be here," said the mastiff. And a feeling of exhilaration suddenly swept over him, like a great smile of peace. He knew with certainty, at last, that when the Master came, she would be very pleased.