

WHAT IS *GOOD* ABOUT CHRISTIANITY?¹

Matthew 7: 15-29

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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This week I posted on Facebook the hot question for today: “What is GOOD about Christianity?” I immediately received responses from friends from as far away as the state of Washington, as well as many responses from closer to home.

I

One responder said, “That’s an odd question for an experienced preacher to ask!” I suppose it may seem so, but it underlines the reality that Christianity receives a lot of negative press. In recent months we seem to have been bombarded with negative images of Christian faith, from popular anti-Christian authors like Christopher Hitchens to the sarcastic humor of Bill Mahr to the politicizing of the faith by extremists to hate-speech in the name of Christianity to all kinds of sexual or financial scandals among high profile clergy.

There is the belief by many that all Christians are self-righteous, smug, and holier-than-thou, and that all Christians are judgmental, mean-spirited, hate filled, and homo-phobic. There is the assumption by some that Christians

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have done more harm than good in human history, and that they are all narrow-minded and anti-intellectual.

II

I want to be very personal here and say that if I really believed that caricature, I would not want to invest my whole adult life in the church. It is true that there are times when I am embarrassed for the Christian faith. There are times when I am discouraged by actions of Christians and Christian churches. But would you like to know what keeps me faithful to the church and to Christian faith?

In a word, YOU do! By “you” I mean the thousands of Christians who live out their Christian faith in practical, passionate, healthy, and down-to-earth ways. You don’t get carried away by the angry pulpit pounders who use their Bible more as a club than a guide, and who use their sanctimonious vocabulary and their scare tactics to enrich themselves. I have been fortunate to be pastor of churches and teach in seminaries where there are morally thoughtful, compassionate, open-hearted Jesus-loving people who don’t get their knickers in a twist over the minutia of church dogma, who care deeply for the crying needs of the community and the world, who have no interest in repressing women or slamming Islam or bashing others for their beliefs or differences. I have been deeply moved by faithful Christian scientists who

engage in rigorous scientific thought while following the Way of Christ with no conflict between the two disciplines.

I have been blessed by Christians who have shown enormous courage and peace in the face of terrible ugliness or tragedy; I have been encouraged by Christians who have demonstrated amazing compassion and generosity; I have been inspired by Christian people who have stood courageously for justice, by social activists that have led the way with courage, by professors who have been unafraid of new knowledge, by students who have given me hope for a new generation, by children who have made me weep with pride, by economically poor Christians who have shown me enormous wealth of wisdom, and by economically rich Christians who have demonstrated the grace of humility and generosity.

I have never visited in a hospital founded in the name of atheism. But I have visited and observed many a hospital, orphanage, school, summer camp, home for the elderly, youth program, soup kitchen, job training center, homeless shelter, and counseling center founded and built by Christian people in the name of Christ. I have never seen these Christians get a great deal of publicity, but I know that they are out there because I see them at church and at work in the community. They come in all sizes, span the entire age-range, and identify themselves in various ways. They are Republicans and

Democrats and Independents, but they don't identify Christ with any one political party or position. They don't like to hear people invoking God's will all the time because they have heard enough lies by people doing selfish and immoral things in the name of God's will. They aren't racist, homophobic, or sexist. They care about the poor. They have little patience for small-minded, hateful practitioners of a religion that carries the name of Christianity but whose actions would make Jesus wince. They hate war, but they care deeply for those who are ordered to fight wars. They are not full of venom and they aren't afraid of their sexuality and they don't despise other religions.

It is those Christians who come streaming into this church and thousands of others like it each Sunday and throughout the week, and they welcome everybody into this non-judgmental place. When they come in, they don't check their brain at the door. But neither do they check their emotions. They sing old hymns that are full of meaning and memories, and they gladly learn new ones. They remember those who have loved them and encouraged them and inspired them, and they give thanks to God. They study together and plan together and make things happen together. They become a true congregation, far more than an unrelated group of individuals who happen to show up at the same place at the same time.

It is those Christians who inspire me with the GOOD of Christianity. Lay aside all the intellectual arguments about Christianity. Table all the intricacies of theology; disregard all the stupidities that pass for Christian faith; shelve all the embarrassment you feel about people who claim to be Christians but seem blind to the ethical implications of Christian faith. What is left is the vast majority of ordinary people who are the extraordinary bearers of Christian faith to the world. What is left is a faith that truly does change lives for the better, transform communities for good, and even transform whole regions and countries to live more peacefully, more productively, and more caringly.

Somewhere I read a story about Mother Teresa that says a man saw her embracing a leper, and the man said to her, "I wouldn't do that for all the money in the world." Mother Teresa replied, "I wouldn't do it for all the money in the world either; I do it for the love of Christ."

III

It is the love of Christ that builds a solid foundation for our lives. Jesus gave us a gift at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. That gift is a story, a parable, about building our lives. He spoke of two houses: each house may have looked the same from the outside, but the truth is that they were built on different foundations. One was built on shifting sand, and the other was built on a rock.

Back in the 15th century, in a tiny village near Nuremberg, lived a family blessed with eighteen children. Eighteen! In order to merely keep food on the table for this large family, the father worked long hours in his profession as a goldsmith. The two older boys in the family were named Albrecht and Albert, and they each had a dream. They both dreamed of becoming artists, but they realized that their father could never afford to send them to study at the art academy in Nuremberg.

One night, after long discussions, the two boys worked out a pact with each other. They would toss a coin. The loser would take a job down in the nearby mines, and with his earnings, he would support the other brother at the art academy. Then, when the brother who won the toss completed his studies after four years, he in turn would support the other brother at the academy, either with the sale of his artwork or if necessary by working in the mines. They agreed to toss the coin on a Sunday morning after church.

Albrecht Dürer won the toss and went off to the academy in Nuremberg. His brother Albert went down into the mines, and for the next four years he financed his brother's education at the art academy. Albrecht's etchings, his woodcuts, and his oil paintings were a sensation. By the time of his graduation, he was already earning considerable fees for his commissioned

works. His family was proud and held a festive dinner for him at his graduation.

After a memorable meal, punctuated with music and laughter, Albrecht rose from his honored place at the head of the table and proposed a toast to his brother Albert for the years of sacrifice he had made to enable his brother to fulfill his dream. His closing words were, "And now Albert, blessed brother of mine, now it is your turn. Now you can go to Nuremberg and pursue your dream, and I will take care of you."

The whole family turned to see what Albert would say, and they saw tears streaming down his face. He began to sob, and said, "No...no...no." He held up his hands before those he loved and said, "No, brother. It is too late for me. Look at what four years in the mines have done to my hands. The bones in my fingers have been smashed, and my right hand has arthritis so badly that I couldn't even hold a glass to return your toast. For me, it is too late."

Over 450 years have passed since then, and Albrecht Dürer's portraits, engravings, etchings, and woodcuts hang in all the great museums of the world. But the odds are great that you, like most people, are most familiar with only one of Albrecht Dürer's works. One day, to pay homage to his brother Albert for all that he had sacrificed, Albrecht Dürer painstakingly

drew his brother's abused hands with palms together and thin fingers stretched skyward. He simply called his drawing, "Hands," but almost immediately the entire world opened their hearts to this great masterpiece and renamed it, "The Praying Hands."²

IV

This kind of love, built on the foundation of the love of Christ, is the solid rock on which we can build our lives. It is sacrificial love; it is the Way of Christ; it is the way for us.

*On Christ the solid rock I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.*

² "Matthew," *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*, pp. 165-66.