

“Essential Christianity”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2: 19b-20a).

On Tuesday, the citizens of North Carolina will once again have the opportunity to exercise one of our most important privileges, to vote in the primary elections to be held throughout the state, as we participate in the process of electing not only the person who will be the next President of the United States, but also races for Governor, United States Senator, and a host of other important local and regional officials.

Throughout the Presidential debates there are a number of issues that seem to be on people’s minds: a sagging economy, the War in Iraq, global warming and other environmental issues, as well as other far reaching issues such as the health care crisis, the elimination of poverty, and how to unite a divided country.

There are two problems, however, that no politician of which I am aware has addressed: the problem of death and the problem of sin.

The problem of death is the greatest problem that each one of us faces. Of all the creatures on earth, only humans live with consciousness that one day we will all die. This creates a great deal of anxiety in all of us and how we deal with this reality is one of the great tests of faith.

The problem of human sinfulness is another matter. Scott Peck, a noted psychiatrist, once wrote a book he entitled *People of the Lie*. Peck surveys various types of evil and concludes that the most dangerous type of evil is also the most subtle. We all condemn bullies and child abusers but what about manipulative parents who have an equally devastating effect on their children? Peck identified several characteristics of this subtle kind of evil, scapegoating behavior, intolerance to criticism, a pronounced concern with a public image and self-image of respectability, and intellectual deviousness.

The problem of death and the problem of evil are certain two of the most endemic problems of the human dilemma and it is to these problems that the Christian gospel is addressed.

So, this morning I want to look at the components that constitute essential Christianity.

I.

The first element of essential Christianity is a great need. This realization of need comes in a number of ways. For some it is a sense of inadequacy in meeting the demands of life. Recently, I spoke with a friend facing a very serious surgery. He was aware that there was a chance that he might not live through the surgery. In times like these, we are reminded of the great demands that life places on us and we long for the spiritual resources to meet these demands.

Others experience this sense of need through moral failure. Sin is often a Trojan horse. We welcome it through a breach in our walls as did that ancient city, only to discover hostile forces coming out that we never expected. Habit, for example. Sometimes we are free to sin but not free to stop. Sometimes we begin some habit with perfect freedom only to find that we cannot extricate ourselves. Then we are left with guilt, disappointment, and shame. Moreover, sometimes we find that the sin we have committed does not only affect us. It affects those we love. So, age after age, people facing moral failure and its tragic aftermath have sought a personal experience of Christ, his forgiveness and power because they needed him.

Sometimes we understand this sense of need through the realization of the possibilities of life that elude us. Peter Shaeffer in his play *Amadeus* describes the great jealousy that the composer Salieri felt toward this boy genius, W. A. Mozart. In one powerful scene Salieri cries out to God, “Now for the first time I feel my emptiness as Adam felt his nakedness ... Tonight at an inn somewhere in this city stands a giggling child who can put on paper, without actually setting down his billiard cue, casual notes which turn my most considered ones into lifeless scratches.”

II.

The second element in essential Christianity is a great salvation. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church in Galatia, speaks to this issue. He himself had tried to live in light of the demands of the Jewish law. He was a “Pharisee of the Pharisees.” He was a persecutor of the church. But on the road to Damascus he encountered the living Christ so that he could say, “It is no longer I that live but Christ who lives in me.”

Salvation comes in a number of ways. For some it is an opportunity for a second chance. Many people have experienced failure—in their jobs, in their homes, in their personal lives. One of the most powerful parables of Jesus is the story of the “Prodigal Son.” Here was a young man who had lost everything. He had squandered his inheritance in a foreign land and now was living in a pig sty. But Luke’s gospel tells us that this prodigal “came to himself” —he went home to his father, and his father received him—as a son.

Philip Yancey wrote recently of speaking to a group of alcoholics who were part of an “Alcoholic Anonymous” group of recovering alcoholics. Yancey observed that this group confesses everyday what each one of us should confess—personal failure, the daily need for grace and help from friends and from God to overcome our sense of self-dependency and self-sufficiency.

In his letter to the Church at Rome Paul concludes, “There is none righteous, not even one.” Then Paul sketches out in one of the darkest passages in the entire Bible an anatomical description of deceitful tongues, morbid throats, poisonous lips, bitter mouths, violent feet and arrogant eyes (3:10-18).

The answer to this dilemma is God’s grace, which is the only solution to the problem of death and evil. This grace, as Paul points out in the letter to the church at Galatia, is a free gift. It does not come from doing works of righteousness. It comes solely as a gift of God.

But God’s grace is not something to be talked about. It is primarily something that we experience. When Harry Emerson Fosdick was once asked why he wrote a book on prayer as a young man, Fosdick replied that it was as a young man, he first understood the meaning of prayer. When Fosdick wrote the book *The Meaning of Prayer*, he was a young seminary student. Like many young people he was working hard, undertaking too many responsibilities, and struggling with inner demons. When finally he was hospitalized after an extreme nervous breakdown and an attempted suicide, he reached out to God in a desperate way hoping to find what the Apostle Paul found when he said, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

That is salvation—forgiveness, a second chance, reinforcement, power and new direction. All through the ages, that is what people have found in Christ—a great need, met by a great salvation.

III.

A third element in essential Christianity is a great sense of gratitude. John Calvin once wrote that the essence of the Christian life was gratitude to God. One cannot understand the New Testament of the driving power of the Christian church without taking measure of the fact that a profound need met by a profound salvation inevitably results in a profound gratitude.

Our gratitude to God is expressed in many ways. It is expressed in our worship, in the giving of our gifts to the church, and in the way we live lives of service. It is also expressed in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper which is sometimes referred to as the “Eucharist,” which is the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” Whenever we break bread and share a cup, we acknowledge our gratitude to God for what he has done for us.

One of the most beloved ministers of the Church of Scotland was a man by the name of George Matheson. As a young boy, he suffered from a deteriorating disease of the eye. By the time he was eighteen he had lost all his sight. Despite this handicap he graduated from Glasgow

Academy, the University of Glasgow and the Church of Scotland Seminary. He was also the writer of a number of hymns.

One of the hymns he wrote is the hymn “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.” No one knows for sure the occasion of this hymn. Some believe it came as a result of the young woman who refused to marry Matheson, because of his blindness. Others have speculated it was provoked by an occasion when he had asked his Presbytery to relieve him of his ordination only to discover that the Presbytery would not allow him to leave.

But whatever the circumstances of this hymn might have been, they are certainly expressed in the words:

“O love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.”

That is gratitude, and it is an essential part of the Christian experience.

IV.

There is a fourth element in the creation experience of Christ and it is a great compulsion. It stands to reason that if a person has known a great need, experienced a great salvation, and has expressed a profound thanksgiving, that something has taken a hold of him. He is not his own. He is under a powerful inner compulsion.

This is true of all the great artists and musicians. The great composers like Bach and Beethoven wrote music not because they wanted to but because they had to. There was something in side of them that could not be denied. It was a force that demanded to be set free.

Over the past weeks I have had the occasion to see a number of the episodes on “John Adams” which is currently a series on HBO, based on the biography by David McCullough. John Adams lack the kind of magnetism of a George Washington or a Thomas Jefferson, but he was a person who was true to himself and the core values which defined his life. He had a profound love of his native state of Massachusetts. He believed in the power and integrity of the law. On one occasion, Adams defended the British soldiers who were responsible for the killing of ordinary citizens during what was called the “Boston Massacre.” It was a very controversial and unpopular decision for Adams. It pitted him against his fellow citizens of Boston. But Adams had a sense of a higher calling, “the right of the accused to a fair trial.”

That is a great compulsion. It is what St. Paul meant when he said, “I must see Rome.” Why must he? No one made him undertake that adventure which finally cost him his life. What made David Livingston, the great missionary, leave a secure home to die in Africa?

There is no greater need in our world today than people who have this kind of compulsion to change the world and make it a better place. We may get by without more

skyscrapers and gadgets, but we will not prosper as a city without this kind of Christian character that will not rest until the terrible destructive patterns of our city are changed.

If you lack it, then seek it. If you have only a little of this, deepen it and strengthen it—a great need, a great salvation, a great gratitude, and a great compulsion.

Amen.