

2 After Epiphany – 1/15/12 – HRLC

Text – 1 Corinthians 2: 2

The Fundamentals of a Progressive

I want to talk to you this morning about “The Fundamentals of a Progressive,” and the text is “*I am determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” This is the verse upon which I have claimed to found my ministry for the past 35 years – having started to use it on my stationary in 1974, when I was an intern in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I believe that what Paul meant by this is: I am determined to know nothing among you, except that which Jesus considered fundamental, that which led him to the cross, and that which caused God to say “Yes” to his efforts when the world had pronounced a gigantic “No!”

I was in a conversation the other day, at a union rally, with some people that I did not know very well. As things broke up one of them, an Episcopalian Priest said to me “*Do you believe the fundamentals of the faith?*”

Now I could tell by the tone of his voice and the expression on his face, as well as some of his previous comments in the conversation, that I probably did not believe in his fundamentals. So, I guess I hesitated a moment too long in deciding how to respond to him. Before I could answer, he said, “*I believe you are a liberal.*”

Now, I don't particularly like labels, and especially when they are put on me by somebody I don't particularly take to, anyway. So, I said: *No. I believe that fundamentalists just want to tear institutions down, that liberals want to save the institutions so that they work the way they are supposed to, and that progressives want to think outside of the box and transform the institutions and the world in which we live, in order to fully establish God's kingdom. If you must label me, label me proudly as a progressive.*”

Of course, labels are not important, but what we believe is terribly important. And, even as a progressive I insist that I have a right to my own “fundamentals” and I would like to share (at least some of) them with you today.

The first fundamental of a progressive is that God is all goodness and total love; and therefore, God never punishes or rewards. God loves his children just as much when they are bad, as when they are good. Therefore, any good behavior that comes out of fear of punishment from God, or due

to the hope of reward from God, comes out of the wrong motives.

God does not make special effort on behalf of his children when they are good, and withhold his blessings from them when they are bad. Jesus put it; “God's rain falls on the just and the unjust.”

In fact, the New Testament seems to indicate that if God makes any special effort on behalf of any of his children, it is on behalf of those who are lost. In the lost sheep parable the shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep in the fold and went out to make a special effort to find the lost one. This is a clear indication of this.

I have a daughter—as most of you know—and I love her with all the capacity of a parent. There is no way for her to lose me, or my good will, or my continuing effort on her behalf—no matter what she might do. When she has done wrong, I have suffered with her. Sometimes I think more than she has, because it is more painful to suffer for someone you love than to suffer yourself. Jesus said, “If you, being human, know how to do good things for your children, how much more does your heavenly Father care for you?”

Goodness is its own reward. Evil is its own punishment. And when we get that punishment, God suffers through it with us. Anything that places a condition on the love and favor of God—I believe—is not in line with the image Jesus gives us of God.

Vern Holmes and I have been reading a book by Dom Crossan recently, *The Greatest Prayer*. It is about the theological reality of The Lord's Prayer. The other day we were discussing the 5th petition: *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who owe debts to us.*

As we got into a section regarding the transfer from the debt image of Matthew to the sin image of Luke, I remarked: “*I think, perhaps, we can only accept the forgiveness of God for our sins to the extent that we forgive others who have sinned against us.*”

As I tried to explain my position, Vern stopped me dead, when he said: “*Wouldn't it be more truthful to say that we can forgive others only to the extent that we accept the forgiveness of God?*”

And, he was right. The acceptance of the forgiveness comes first, and our forgiving others follows. So, the first fundamental of a progressive is that God is all good and total love, and never punishes or rewards.

The second fundamental of a progressive is that all of God's creation is good, and evil is the misuse of that good. If God is the creator of all things and if God is totally good, then God is incapable of creating evil. In the account of creation in Genesis there is one phrase that keeps repeating itself, over and over again. At the close of each day of creation the scripture says, "*God saw it, and it was good.*"

Sometime back I was at a National Farm Worker Ministry meeting and at the end of a day of visiting with Farm Workers and picketing at a local grocery chain we wound up in the parish hall of a small church in North Carolina. There were several large banners decorating the room, made from felt and burlap. They were obviously the work of the children of the congregation. It was very interesting to sit there and look at them. I'd like to meet the little boy or girl who made one that said, "*God made me, and he don't make no junk.*" Everything God made is good and evil exists only in the misuse of that good. Think about that! Everything in God's creation is potentially good.

There are no bad keys on a piano. Now, if I sit down to play there would seem to be some bad keys on the piano; but put the right person on the stool and there are no bad keys.

People who are really hung up on demons and the devil have always confounded me. I think it started in the seminary, when angels and the devil were big topics for the "Fact Finding Committee" that was interviewing the faculty in an attempt to identify heresy. I remember that Arliss Ehlen was asked if he believed in angels and devils. He thought for a while, and then he responded: *I am fairly certain that I do not believe in angels, because I do not see any evidence of their being in my life. ON the other hand, I am equally sure that I believe in devils, as I see evidence of their being sitting before me.*"

As much as I admired Arliss' candor, even 35 years later I was not so sure about his answer, or his beliefs. And then, one day an ultra-conservative Archbishop asked me, in a confrontational manner: "*Don't you believe in demons and the devil?*"

I thought about it for a long time. Finally I said: "*I can't say I really believe in either. I can't believe in demons because I don't believe in the devil. And, I don't believe in the devil because I don't have two Gods – a good one and a bad one. I have only one God whose will is total good and my*

rebellion against him is evil; and I give personality to that evil when I participate in that rebellion."

The third fundamental of a progressive is that Jesus is what all men are meant to be. He is the second Adam, the scripture says. The first Adam demonstrated the potential failure of all people. The second Adam demonstrates the potential success of all people. Jesus is what God intended Adam to be. This is the reason Jesus could say, "*That which I do, you can do; and greater things you will do.*"

I believe Jesus. I can almost hear him sometimes saying, "*Stop worshipping me.*" He never asked us to worship him, but he asked us to follow him.

I'm almost ashamed to say it, but I sometimes I'm very tempted not to use the name, Jesus, because of the "sweet Jesus" cult – those fundamentalists who sing love songs to Jesus as they worship him. I believe they are destroying him by worshipping him. I find myself, when it comes time to say, "Jesus," tending to say, "The Christ."

On that day when the disciples came upon Jesus in prayer, unexpectedly, they apparently saw something in him they had never seen before, and they wanted it. They said, "*Lord, teach us to pray.*" And he said, "*When you pray say, 'Our Father, who art in Heaven...'*" In other words, pray to God—worship God. On another occasion they came to him and said "*Good Master,*" and he stopped them before they could continue and said, "*Why call you me good? There is none good, but the Father.*"

People have somehow always preferred to worship an ideal rather than practice it. Mankind has done some of his best escaping of responsibility by worshipping. The reason is that lip service is so much easier than daily living. It is like a man who speaks with great respect for his mother, then goes out and does things that he knows will break her heart. I have a feeling that The Christ would much rather be an elder brother or a guide than a God. He never asked that we worship him. He asked that we be like him – that we continue the ministry he started – that we follow him.

He didn't ask us to follow him onto the baseball diamond (and to give him credit for home runs), he didn't ask us to follow him onto the basketball court (and to give him credit for dunks and free throws), and he certainly didn't ask us to follow him onto the football field (and to give him credit for touchdowns and sacks). He asked us to follow him into the ghettos and the barrios of this world. He asked us to follow him and to care for the

orphans and the widows and the undocumented aliens of this world. He asked us to follow him in speaking truth to power and in calling for the recognition of God's kingdom here and now.

The scripture says Jesus walked on water. I believe there is a relationship between the spiritual and physical world that when the perfect balance and perfect attunement comes, the spirit world will control the physical world. I believe that it's possible that Jesus walked on water, but if he did, we can too. I'm interested in the miracles of Jesus that can be repeated, not the one time miracles of Jesus. The miracles that are significant are the ones he was able to do and the ones that when we become as he is—we, too, shall do.

Another fundamental of a progressive is that the Bible is a book of truth, not magic. This means some parts of scripture are more inspired than others. It means that the truths that are in scripture are in the Bible because they are true, and not true because they are in the Bible. There is a big difference between these. It means that myth nearly always contains more truth than historic fact. Take the Book of Job, for instance. If Job had been one man who lived in one place at one time, that is an "historic figure" the writer could have put on Job only the troubles that one man would have at one place in one time. But if Job is a "mythical figure," then the writer can heap upon Job all the troubles that anybody ever has, and we can all identify with Job.

Myth is the expression of the inexpressible. The reason there is so much myth in the Bible is that there is so much inexpressible truth that is too great for words. Very little great literature of man is historic or scientific in its nature. Almost all of it is mythological, or parabolic, or fictional, or poetic, because these are the forms of literature in which man has found he can express his truths most graphically and exactly. Jesus knew this. This is the reason when he really wanted to make a point he told them in a parable. In fact, this was so obvious that one writer of scripture expressed it in these words, "*Without a parable, he never spoke to them.*"

The fifth fundamental of a progressive is that every person is entitled to experience God in his or her own way. The only God I have is the God I have experienced. My God must be my own, and no one can prescribe what the experience will be like or what the experience of God might do to me. It may make me be immersed in water, and it may not. It may make me say, "Praise the Lord," and it

may not. It may make me speak in tongues that no one around me can understand, and it may not. The only real test for that experience is, "Does it make me love God with all my heart, and my neighbor as myself?"

Another fundamental of a progressive is that the kingdom will come with Christ in the hearts of humanity, and not on "clouds of glory." The main trouble with the "second-coming" preaching of many fundamentalists is that it is just not true. Jesus said, "*There are those standing here who will not taste death until they enter the kingdom.*" I do not believe that Jesus was grossly mistaken, or had the grossly mistaken idea that they would still be alive after his crucifixion, and his resurrection, and his second-coming when he said this.

Even though we cannot separate God's part and man's part in bringing the kingdom, because apparently one cannot do so without the other, if I had to pick, I would say God is further ahead on doing his part than we are doing ours. The kingdom is not waiting for God to get ready. The kingdom is waiting for us to get ready.

Finally, another fundamental of a progressive is that salvation is accepting the grace and the unconditional love of God as revealed in The Christ. It is not in some penance on our part, and it is not in some payment of debt on the part of Jesus.

They beat him; they put a crown of thorns on his head; they stripped the clothes off of him, and put a ragged robe on him; they put the cross on his shoulder and made him carry it to the top of the hill. There they nailed him to it; and when he wouldn't die quickly enough they put the spear in his side. With the last ounce of energy draining out of his body, he looked down upon them and he said, "*Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.*" And at that moment he becomes our Savior.

In that moment God decides that Jesus way is right and that in place of the world's no he will put a divine yes, and raise Jesus to his right hand.

It is not an accident, I believe, that the early church chose the cross as its symbol. It could have chosen an open tomb; it could have chosen a manger, but it chose a cross, for here is our salvation – not because God sacrificed his only son, but because on the cross the Christ showed us what it means to be in relationship with God – in that relationship of ultimate love that seeks peace through justice and the establishment of the peaceable kingdom.

These are some of the fundamentals of faith for a progressive. Let me hasten to say that these kinds of things would take hours, and weeks, and months to discuss in total. Let me also hasten to say that no person, no group, no denomination can vote "yes" or "no" and determine the fundamentals for all of us. Sooner or later, we all must determine our own fundamentals.

I'm pretty sure about most of mine. How about you? Amen.