

WHY DID I COME BACK?

It is dangerous to draw parallels, especially between different cultures and different ages. And it is especially so since some people will always assume you are trying to draw exactitudes instead of mere parallels. On the other hand, seeing connections between ourselves and others is one of the ways we learn and grow. If we never find ourselves reflected in the New Testament story, it will never mean very much to us. So despite the fact that we are not Jesus or Paul and do not see ourselves capable of doing some of the things they did, we *do* find, in our own lesser versions of the Great Story, principles at work that include us in the drama going on here between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of human will all around us.

Philippi was Paul's favorite church. The Philippian Christians supported, loved, and prayed for Paul more than the Christian communities in any of the other churches Paul founded. Of course, there were many individual exceptions, but essentially this was true. The Philippians continually sent messengers to see how Paul was, to bring him encouragement, and to bring him monetary gifts to help with his ministry.

Philippi was an unlikely place for a Christian community to thrive. There was no synagogue there, and Paul always started his ministry in a new town by preaching in the synagogue. But Paul and Silas found a small gathering of the faithful "down by the riverside." Philippi was a Roman Colony, made so by Octavian (Augustus Caesar) in honor of the great victory over Brutus and Cassius (42 B.C.) that established him as the emperor of Rome. This battle was fought on the plain just outside Philippi. Thus Philippi became a favorite place for high-ranking Roman officials to come for a beautiful but quieter life than in Rome, while still retaining all the rights and privileges they would have had in Rome itself. Philippi was a "little Rome" – both wealthy and exceedingly loyal and patriotic to the empire.

A city with such a powerful Roman culture is not where we would normally expect to find an easy, welcoming atmosphere for Christians. From my perspective, Newport Beach is a bastion of pagan culture too. But at the edge of its emptiness, some are looking for more than sex or wealth or outer success or the illusion that nobody is getting any older.

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Anyway, Lydia, a dealer in purple goods, had moved from Thyatira to Philippi presumably because there was no better market for purple goods short of Rome itself. Lydia had heard Paul preach “down by the riverside.” We learn that the Christian community in Philippi was soon meeting in her home. Another leading layperson at Philippi was a man named Luke. He had persuaded Paul to come to Philippi in the first place. Luke stayed in Philippi all through Paul’s second and third missionary journeys, only joining him on the way to Jerusalem at the end of the third journey. Luke stayed with Paul from then on to the end of his life.

Philippi was Paul’s favorite church. This church has been mine. Hopefully you will not agree, but Corona del Mar seems to me an unlikely place for a Christian community to thrive. Oh, I can imagine religious institutions being comfortable and successful here, but a community of intentional Christians wanting to live the Christian Life? That seems countercultural to me. All around us there are signs of values and purposes and attitudes that one would not ordinarily associate with people serious about following Jesus. Yet we discover that lots of Lukes and Lydias and Epaphrodituses live here as well.

Philippi was important to Paul. This church is important to me. By the way, the parallel between Philippi and Corona del Mar is about pagan values and perspectives – not about wealth. I have never had the luxury of hating the rich. Early in my ministry and in all the churches I have served since, I have run into too many of the faithful rich to believe the usual jaundice that comes from much of the liberal-church propaganda in our time. So of course I started wondering about Jesus and the New Testament records. I soon discovered that Jesus had many wealthy friends, and some very serious followers were among them. I even started wondering about God. How is it that so many people assume that God loves the poor and despises the rich? Isn’t God wealthy beyond all our imagining? Does God hate himself, or feel guilty all the time about being rich? And why doesn’t God wave a magic wand and make all of us instantly rich? Well, no time for simplex theological questions today.

By the way, Jesus never acted poor. He seemed to know that He was Himself wealthy and powerful in another realm – a Prince In Disguise, as it were. Hard to know for sure. But despite the humility, the prayers, the compassion and kindness we often see – despite the teachings about “love your neighbor” and forgiveness and being merciful – I cannot think of a single instance in the New Testament

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records where anyone was able to steer Jesus off His course or make Him do something He did not want to do. Not His mother, His friends, the Pharisees, the High Priest, the King, or the whole weight of the entire Sanhedrin could make Him change His purpose or lose His focus. Clearly it was not for lack of trying. It does make me wonder if we aren't missing a piece in the way we usually try to tell His Story.

It's poor judgment, I suspect, to say much about personal motives from the pulpit. But the sermon title asks: "Why did I come back?" Everybody knows you are not supposed to go back to a former parish. And you do not have to remind me that I am too old. I know that better than anybody. I had some good reasons for staying in Omaha. The Tri-Faith Initiative that Countryside has recently voted to engage in is already being called the most exciting new mission in the entire UCC world. So how could you end up seeming more important to me than staying in Omaha to be part of that?

I may never mention it again – if we are both lucky, I *will* never mention it again – but I love this church. I suspect you do not really know what you look like in my eyes. I think you have a very important role to play – an important destiny as a faith family. I suspect that things have been going awry, and for some time now, because Satan is even more worried about your destiny and purpose than you are. We can argue later about how debilitated things had become here, but I think it would be a tragedy if we lost this church. And we are losing churches all over the landscape. That is not a distant theoretical possibility; that is our current reality. There are one hundred and seventy UCC churches in Maine. Twenty-three of them are able to sustain a full-time Minister. Even then, many of those Ministers are being paid less than a living wage.

Despite the problems, I think you are important. And despite the turmoil, I think you are wonderful. But the truth is that even though I have many thoughts and feelings, I do not really know why I came back. I have hunches, I have hopes, I have theories and notions, but the truth is that I came back because I became convinced that the Spirit was asking me to come back. After a while it became clear that you as a congregation were doing some remarkable, unusual, rather courageous things to make it possible for me to return. So I ended up concluding that the Spirit was working on you too. We do not know for sure yet, but we shall see. We have not proved anything yet, but we shall see.

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What will the evidence be that this was a faithful move, either for me or for you? Another conundrum. If we end up with three hundred and fifty members or eight hundred and fifty members, will that prove anything? I mean, besides the fact that we really do have a parking problem. But what if one person comes into one of our Disciple Bands and ends up changing their purpose in life? What if one young person, as a result of what is going on here, decides to become a Minister? And if from that comes fifty years of faithful ministry after I am long gone? Would that be worth my coming back? So now we are playing my song – at least one I can hear and rejoice in.

But we do not know yet. That is always the trouble with Life in Christ Jesus – Life in the Spirit. We try to follow the guidance – try to follow the lead. We try to stay faithful one day at a time, but we never know for certain what the Spirit is really doing. So having admitted that we never know for certain, I will tell you anyway. You can laugh and relax, but after that I suspect some of you will try to help. I cannot do anything without your help, of course. But I suspect many of you will resonate. We are not all strangers, and the Spirit can build bonds rather quickly – when we are willing to allow it.

I suspect that we – not just this church, but Christianity in our country – are in a time of “Babylonian Captivity.” We have been through such phases numerous times in our history. (It is not altogether dissimilar from Israel in Jesus’ time.) The original Babylonian Captivity occurred at the tail end of the prophet Jeremiah’s life, when most of what remained of the “People of Israel” was carried off into captivity in a distant land. Many lost faith and melted into the culture around them. But small groups continued to meet together when they could. They went about their labors as slaves and captives, but they prayed and studied and worshipped together more earnestly than ever before. With everything they had known and cherished gone, it threw them back into depending on God far more than they had done in their former lives in Israel. But mostly they waited. They had little choice.

If this is a time of Babylonian Captivity for us, then we have not yet entered the time of renewal. We are in a time of waiting and patience; a time of deeper prayer and reflection; a time to renew relationships – with God and with each other. It is a time to rediscover our own identity and our purpose and our true allegiance. God will not bring renewal until we are ready. From such awareness comes true patience.

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At the present time, we have a lot of brilliant teachers and leaders, many trying to find a way to renew and restore the church. But I suspect we still live in the time before true surrender to the Spirit's leadership. There is a lot of human caring and strategy going on, much of it competing for who can save us. But what we need is the real Savior. Yet that is counter to all our instincts as Americans: move it; do it; fix it; go into action; take care of it. That is the American way, but not always the Christian Way. So if we are trying to take care of it ourselves – trying to bring the church back into prominence by our own efforts or our own wisdom, concentrating on what we are feeling and on what we think we should be doing – then that will only make the period of captivity last longer.

With that as the backdrop. I suspect we need to turn most of our attention toward being “the remnant that remains”: the faithful few who wait and watch; who truly repent; who really want to be faithful, above all other things, to whatever the Spirit wants of us and wants from us. So here is my list, if you should wonder:

1.) We will stop trying to be successful churches, in a time when “success” is automatically unfaithful.

2.) We will gather in Disciple Bands and smaller churches, and we will be content to support and care about each other as “disciples and followers” within the churches where we belong. Increasingly and without apology, we will say that Disciple Bands *are* the real church. We will be happy to welcome those who might wish to join us in “living the Life while we wait.” Most of us will be active outside our band of followers, as the Spirit directs us to use whatever gifts we have in the world. But that will not be where we truly live. We will not expect, without strong guidance, to make any true or lasting impact on the world outside the church.

3.) We will spend much time in study and contemplation, reviewing and reworking our understanding of Christian relationships and beliefs and expectations. This will not be an attempt to renew the larger church, but will be an attempt for us to be renewed ourselves. Jesus is more and greater and more profound than anything the world has seen or realized so far – by far.

We may still read, notice, and ponder other leaders, but we will stop any efforts to ingratiate ourselves by weakening our loyalty to Jesus as the Christ.

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People of other faiths are not our enemy – unless they insist on being. Even then, we will not try to harm them. (Love your enemies.) With respect and by listening to each other, we may learn and even find new depths to our own understandings. But *“you shall have no other gods before me”* translates for us as “you shall have no other Messiah before or equal to Jesus.”

4.) There are mistakes and blunders in our traditions, as is always true in a broken world. We will not be surprised by them, nor shall we pretend we “do not see” the ones we do see: the Virgin Birth; the Second Coming; apocalyptic scenarios (though in our time, some of them may be coming more from science than from religion); creedal approaches to truth. These are huge blunders, and they do immense damage to our Faith for as long as we hold on to them. They obscure who Jesus is, and they obscure Jesus’ Message and purpose. Jesus is and brings a wondrous and beautiful New Light that shines forth when we begin to see through all the overlays that were tacked-on afterward, and when we get past the presuppositions that were already in place before Jesus came. Do some of you still try to imagine that all of Jesus’ early followers understood Him, and that they all got the full spectrum of His Message crystal clear and perfectly sorted out in their minds? Don’t you know anything about the real world?

When you read the Gospels, it becomes very clear that the first disciples were enthralled with Jesus. But they were also amazed, often dumbfounded, and much of the time truly confused about what Jesus was saying, what He was doing, and why. Jesus could not get everybody to see past all of their assumptions and presuppositions any more than He can get us to move past all of ours. By the way, why would anything or anyone want to obscure Jesus or His Message? Do you take “The Adversary” seriously yet?

The nature and purpose of Jesus’ ministry did not begin to come clear to any of the early followers until after the Resurrection. Even then, it only started to come clear in bits and pieces. The whole first generation of Christians believed that they would see the close of the age within their own lifetime. They based a lot of their own hopes and expectations on this misunderstanding of some things Jesus had said about the coming destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.). Two thousand years now prove that they got this part wrong. Have you yourself admitted yet that they were wrong about this? They were wrong about a lot of things, just like we are. That does not mean they did not love Jesus or that they did not truly want and try to follow Him faithfully.

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Of course, it *does* mean that when the early followers tried to write down some things to encourage each other (long before anyone had ever even thought about a New Testament), they did not all suddenly get everything right or all suddenly agree with each other. It was not the intent that we should all swallow everything they wrote without question or prayer or discernment. The notion that our Bible is inerrant and without contradiction or error is one of the most ridiculous ways that Christians have ever dreamed up to try to stop us from thinking or growing in our Faith. Do not think, do not question, do not doubt – just believe. Only, that kind of belief is worth exactly what it cost us: nothing.

Some of you will not want to see this; you will not want to track it with me. I cannot help you if you are determined not to see. As Jesus told us, “*You cannot put new wine into old wineskins.*” But if Jesus had that problem in His own time, why would His followers expect to escape it in our time?

Beyond that, we will do much focusing on the many ways that “Christian faith and belief is about relationships.” This means letting it sink into our methods and our approaches to everything. We will “redeem” or abandon denominational structures that will not redo themselves in this light. Ditto to local institutions that call themselves churches.

5.) We will try never to “entertain” at the expense of deep convictions. Nor will we try to grow (entice others into becoming members) at the expense of what we believe the Spirit wants from us. Many churches today are trying to grow an audience. That is not our purpose. We are an *ecclesia*: a fellowship of people in and under Jesus – a community of people who want to follow Jesus into the WAY, the PATH, the LIFE He sets before us. I strongly suspect that if we ever get this right, we will know that we are wrong. We are a fellowship of sinners. We live on forgiveness and mercy and grace and gratitude. Without such things, we would quickly starve to death.

6.) Prayer will become more and more the focus and center of our lives and of the groups we participate in. Not mouthing words; *listening* for the will and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We will therefore try to honor the people the Spirit brings into our lives. We will try never to be “too busy” ever again. We will pay more attention to joy and inner peace and appreciation for each other

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than ever before. Gratitude – for the Spirit’s presence, first of all – will be our watchword.

And the only “freedom” we seek will be the freedom to be more faithful and obedient to our Lord with each new day.

Why did I come back? I came back because I think the Spirit was asking me to come back.

In that context, I also came back to tell you some of these things – and to see if you might want to live them out with me.