

## CORPORATE

### *Sermon for Easter 2B- Acts 4:32-25, 1Jn 1:1-22*

LPC, 4/12/15

Several years ago I saw a movie called *Into the Wild*. This was the true story of a young man called Christopher McCandless and his solitary journey, in 1991-1992, to find independence and meaning after his graduation from college. This quest takes him far and wide, and eventually to the wilds of Alaska where he lives off the grid in an abandoned bus, sustaining himself literally by hunting and gathering.

The movie was based on a book by Jon Krakauer, which I have not read. But from reading the dust jacket and reviews I gather Krakauer is much more sympathetic than the movie producer to McCandless' desire to remove himself from a culture he perceives as corrupt and exploitative. The movie does not discount this noble impulse, but considers it critically in the context of McCandless' total rejection of human company.

The movie begins by showing McCandless forcibly rejecting his family's expectations. His relationship with his father is particularly strained, but he is close to his sister. Even so, when he sets off on his journey he severs contact with the whole family. During his wanderings, McCandless encounters lots of interesting people, some of whom are also motivated to live counter-culturally, though perhaps not to the same extent as McCandless himself. He finds friendship, in turn, with a hippie couple, a young girl, and a lonely, elderly man, who even offers to adopt him. But he always moves on.

In Alaska, he finally achieves his goal of total self-sufficiency. But after months alone, when he tries to return to civilization, he finds his way blocked. The stream he easily crossed during the winter has become a raging, unfordable torrent. He returns to his solitary life of hunting and gathering. Finally, after mistakenly ingesting a toxic plant, he dies alone. His body, and his diary, which describes all of the above, are found by moose hunters two months later.

Now I have preached many times about how countercultural Christianity is. I actually sympathize with McCandless' desire not to participate in the unwholesome features of our culture. I admire his radical commitment to his ideals, at great personal cost. But there's one thing I can't accept. Introvert though I am, as a preacher of the Christian gospel I am bound to proclaim that there is no such thing as individual salvation.

This goes beyond some vague pop-psych idea that we all need someone to love. This is beyond psychology and sociology. This is theology. As I've said before, Jesus Christ came into the world to redeem the world, the whole enchilada, and to make *all creation* new. Jesus Christ, as we heard from John's letter today, is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the *whole* world.

As a practical matter, I believe that this means that to follow Jesus we must be concerned with more than our own personal salvation. There are some who would say that to be a Christian is to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Maybe, but that's not all. To be a Christian is to have a corporate relationship with Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Bible, God is portrayed as relating to groups of people. Yes, he establishes his covenant with Abraham, but with the understanding that through Abraham's descendants, God covenants with a great nation. God's relationship with this nation is what the whole Old Testament is about. God has a special relationship with Moses, but with the object of leading the *people* to freedom. The King David and the prophets are not just holy men in their own right, they speak for God to God's *people*.

This emphasis on the collective people is not lost with the coming of Jesus, who does not go about alone but in the company of disciples. Most of the stories of conversion in the book of Acts involve entire communities. St. Paul, in the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians describes the faithful as members of one body, with Christ as the head. There could not be a stronger expression of the corporate nature of Christianity. "Corporate" as you know literally means "body."

What does this mean?

In the first place, it knocks into a cocked hat the idea of being an isolated Christian. Yes, there are Christian solitaries. But being a Christian solitary demands a rigorous discipline of connection to the church and to the rest of creation through prayer and love. There are few people who have sufficient strength of character to do this.

Second, it means we are inextricably bound to each other in joy and sorrow. When one party is in grief or need we bound by our baptism to share what we have to restore them to wholeness. That's what that passage from Acts is about when it speaks of Christians sharing all things in common.

Third, we are carried by the community when we fall short. That's one reason why the original version of the Nicene Creed was written in the plural "We believe," and why the 1979 Prayer Book restored this language. There are some days when our belief is shaky. But the community as a whole keeps the faith for us when we are weak individually.

Finally, our faith suffers when we try to go it alone. I've heard those lines. "I don't go to church but I'm very spiritual." "I can worship God on the golf course." You can do those things, but if you don't worship with other Christians, you're not much of a Christian. Because Christianity is and always has been a group thing.

Yes, we have an obligation to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling. That is because no one knows the inner workings of our hearts as we do (and God does, of course.) But we also have an obligation to each other. That has been plain from the beginning of the great Judeo-Christian experiment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself." If we are to have a relationship with God, we need to be in relationship with each other.

If you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, well and good. But do you, do we, have a corporate relationship with Jesus Christ? That's what counts.