



FOREWORD BY
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IN
SEARCH
OF THE
COMMON
GOOD
CHRISTIAN
FIDELITY
IN A
FRACTURED
WORLD

JAKE MEADOR

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THE PASSING OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH

I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.

REVELATION 2:4-5 (NKJV)

HAVELOCK, THE NEIGHBORHOOD I grew up in and my parents still call home, was historically a working-class railroad town built just northeast of Lincoln, Nebraska, the state capital, in the late nineteenth century. The houses are old and, for the most part, in decent condition even today. Some of the streets are still paved with cobblestones, though the poles and power lines that once lined Touzalin Avenue and powered the trolley have been replaced with narrow islands covered in grass and dotted with modest trees. When I was growing up on Touzalin, I used to tell my parents I'd build a castle on one of those islands, and it would have a walkway—in my mind I pictured a rope bridge—running over Touzalin Avenue, connecting their house to my castle.

There are still neighborhood bars lining Havelock Avenue as well as an old pizza place that has been there since the 1980s and sells the Leaning Tower of Pizza. The pun is a classic Nebraska kind of joke, a wry blend of plainspokenness and dad humor.

It's a surprisingly rough place once you get to know it. A friend who pastors in the neighborhood said to me once that the rest of Lincoln doesn't care about Havelock, and Havelock does not care at all about the

rest of Lincoln. Such benign neglect is actually an improvement on the town's historic relationship to its larger neighbor. When the city of Lincoln annexed the old railroad town in the early twentieth century, the enraged citizens stormed the Havelock town hall, seized all the city's records, and had a bonfire on Havelock Avenue. When my parents needed some information about property lines a few years ago before building a privacy fence, they had to pay a surveyor to come out and figure out where exactly the property lines even were. The official records no longer exist.

Havelock may seem like a strange place to start a book about religion, communal life, and alienation in twenty-first-century America. But it's also where I need to begin for the simple reason that Havelock was—and in one sense still is—my home place. I still live within a fifteen-minute drive of the house on Touzalin Avenue, first built in 1910, that my parents have called home since their wedding day in December 1984. Indeed, they got married in their living room. The pictures from the day are still hanging on the walls, fittingly looking down at the room where the wedding happened thirty-five years before.

That home is the first place I learned about community. It is where I took my first steps, said my first words (not until age three, and only after my grandmother called in to the 700 Club to ask Pat Robertson to pray for me), and saw with my own eyes what Christian community was, what it could be, and what it could make. At home I saw a faith that was warm, vibrant, and connected to the stuff of daily life. It was both hopeful and ambitious.

I saw my parents run several ministries out of that house—a Sunday evening boys program, a meal service for families from church, and a youth hockey league. I also saw my mom write an entire kids curriculum from scratch at a computer in my old playroom. In high school I once made a rude remark to my dad about evangelical indifference to the poor. Though he didn't say anything in response to my comment, that December he signed up to ring a bell for the Salvation Army, something he continued to do for over ten years before an injury made it impossible for him to continue. My parents organized a food drive every year for

the local homeless shelter, an anomalous act of charity in a church that was otherwise concerned almost entirely with its own life.

The life I knew in Havelock explains in large measure why I am still a Christian. Both in my parents' home and the home of my maternal grandmother, who lived a few blocks away, I found an irresistibly compelling faith. It was devout, joyful, serious, simple, and given to the life of humble, largely invisible service the Scriptures call God's people to.

That hidden fidelity is one picture of Christian faith I have seen.

Here is another, and this is one many of my peers have seen as well, I'm afraid: rampant sexual sin among alleged spiritual leaders, a sneering disdain for fellow believers (to say nothing of non-Christians), and a general lack of concern for the poor and the marginalized, all wrapped up in a shiny outer layer that masks the bones moldering within. I have seen a pastor fired after being caught in an affair, only to have the church turn the pastor's children against their (completely innocent) mother and then arrange for the fired pastor to get a comfortable sales gig that probably paid as much or more than his (not inconsiderable) salary from the church. At the end of it all, they marveled at how "God provided."

I've seen staff members go to prison for sexual misconduct and heard stories of six-figure sums of money "disappearing." Many others have also seen in the church the hypocrisy and pride I came to know so well. Where God calls his people to service, the American church has far too often pursued power. When we ought to have embraced the humble place of penitence, we have instead chased after thrones powered by an inexhaustible confidence in our righteousness. And with each turn of the crank, each step into deeper darkness, many of our leaders have chosen to double down on their vanity rather than face the possibility that they may have sown the wind, that their work may not have been done for God but mostly for themselves. They have become wealthy, powerful, needing nothing—and that is precisely the problem. The simple love of God, the love I saw pictured so vividly in my own home, has often been almost entirely absent from movement evangelicalism.

The disgraced megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll once described his church's growth by saying that there was "a pile of dead bodies behind

the Mars Hill bus.” As if that wasn’t bad enough, he added, “and, by God’s grace, it’ll be a mountain by the time we’re done.”¹ Though Mars Hill would close not too many years after Driscoll spoke those awful words, his remarks map quite neatly onto a post-Trumpian evangelicalism that has left behind its first love and instead embraced a gospel of power and wealth. And there is indeed a mountain of bodies in its wake. Many of them are known to me. They’re the people I grew up with, people I went to college with, people whose posts I still see pop up occasionally on Facebook.

This book, then, is not simply about the decline of the evangelical church in America, although we must discuss that first. It is about the broader question of how we build flourishing communities shaped by the truths taught in the Christian faith. The goal is not merely to see the faith passed on to our children but also to see others enter the community and similarly be nourished and in time drawn to Christ themselves. And much of that has to do with the question of place, home, and the daily practices that shape *those* places.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that our current crisis is not one of meaninglessness but rootlessness. “There are no meanings apart from roots.”² As we explore the question of Christian community in a world increasingly set as much against that second word, *community*, as it is the first, *Christian*, we must constantly return to the questions of roots, home, and place, all of which we will explore in more detail later.

Spiritual leaders failed me and many others as well. So did the institutional churches they presided over. But my parents’ home never did, and the simple life we had together in Havelock has made all the difference.

THE PASSING OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH

In Scripture we see repeated examples of how God chastens his people after a season of prolonged and unrepentant sin. The Israelites under Moses wandered for forty years in the desert until the generation who rebelled against God at the first attempted entry into Canaan had almost

entirely died off. Later the period of the Judges would be marked by short terms of fidelity followed by far longer times of particularly egregious sin, with each cycle ending with severe judgment passed against Israel. Still later in the Old Testament both the northern and southern kingdoms would be taken into exile as punishment for their idolatry. Time after time, we see this biblical pattern of God's people entering a season of unrepentant sin and being coldly awoken to their state through a particularly severe form of judgment.

There is ample reason to believe that the American church is entering such a season. The shadow of sexual abuse lingers over both the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and the evangelical church. The stories of abuse of minors in Catholic churches has been known for nearly two decades now. That predatory priests and bishops were targeting seminarians as well became more widely known in 2018 as adult victims of predatory clerics came forward across the northeast and in my hometown of Lincoln. Evangelicals are no better on this issue, sadly. Rape victim Jules Woodson came forward and named her attacker, a former youth pastor of hers, Andy Savage. Savage, who had since become a teaching pastor at a prominent megachurch, publicly confessed the sin to his church, while deliberately misrepresenting Woodson's part in it. The church greeted his confession with a standing ovation. The same thing would happen at Willow Creek when Bill Hybels first acknowledged to the congregation the abuse allegations he faced in spring 2018. These failures alone would be sufficient grounds for God to send the American church into exile, and yet they are not our only grievous offenses.

White evangelicals are more likely than any other religious group to support the use of torture.³ Even after the revelation of President Trump's paid affair with porn star Stormy Daniels, which occurred shortly after the birth of his son Barron, evangelicals continued to support him. Indeed, they were *more* likely to support him in April 2018 than they were in November 2016.⁴ One prominent social conservative leader, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, even proposed that Trump be given "a mulligan" on the Daniels affair. Needless to say, no prominent

evangelical leaders were feeling so forgiving in the 1990s when the occupant of the White House was a Democrat.

On top of the moral hypocrisy, there are other signs of internal rot as well. Public polling on the theological and ethical beliefs of American Catholics is alarming and a testimony to the catechetical failings of the American Roman Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council. According to the Pew Research Group, a full 89 percent of American Catholics view the use of contraception as being either morally acceptable or not a moral issue despite the clear teachings of the Church on the matter. In fact, American Catholics are more likely than nonreligious Americans to say that using contraceptives is morally acceptable. Similarly, 47 percent of American Catholics say that having an abortion is morally acceptable or not a moral issue.⁵ Likewise, a May 2013 Pew study found that 71 percent of American Catholics believe that homosexuality should be morally accepted, another departure from Church teaching. In fact, according to the study, American Catholics are more likely to approve of homosexuality than American mainline Protestants, a famously progressive demographic.⁶

Again, however, the situation among American evangelicals is no better. Consider the famed claim of the mid-2000s that roughly one-third of all Americans were evangelical. That number, along with the Bush presidency, inspired no lack of anxiety among American progressives at the time. But back in 2007 the Barna Group decided to survey those self-described evangelicals to find out what they actually believed theologically.⁷ After all, evangelical identity is not merely a matter of self-description. Traditionally it also implies adherence to certain theological ideas. So, do American evangelicals embrace evangelical beliefs?

The answer Barna found is a resounding *no*. The Barna survey found that while 38 percent of Americans identified as evangelical, only 8 percent of Americans affirmed nine key statements, all taken from the National Association of Evangelicals, which Barna used to narrow what was actually meant by the term *evangelical*. Respondents were asked whether they

1. have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today;

2. believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as Savior;
3. would say their faith is very important in their life;
4. believe they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs with non-Christians;
5. believe that Satan exists;
6. believe salvation is possible only through grace, not works;
7. believe that Jesus lived a sinless life on earth;
8. believe that the Bible is accurate in all it teaches; and
9. would describe God as an all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and rules it today.

Here's what that means: In 2007, 82 million Americans said they were evangelical. However, statistically speaking only around 18 million Americans agreed with all nine of those basic theological commitments. That means 64 million self-described American evangelicals rejected at least one of these extremely basic statements about the nature of Christian faith and piety.

To fully capture what that means, we might put it this way: At the same time that George W. Bush was in the White House, that we were talking about a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, and that progressives were writing panicky books warning about the looming danger of theocracy, we were also overestimating the number of evangelical believers in America by a factor of 4.5. We thought that roughly 38 percent of the nation's population was evangelical. But, theologically speaking, the number was actually more like 8 percent. To be sure, some might argue that one can be culturally evangelical without being theologically evangelical. That said, evangelicalism in particular is at bottom a religious identifier that follows from its affirmation of certain religious doctrines. Cultural evangelicalism is thus not a helpful label.

We looked big and influential on paper. But really we had already been hollowed out by decades of poor catechesis and an alarming tendency to chase worldly fads instead of true Christian discipline. We said, "We are

rich; we have prospered, and we need nothing,” not realizing that we were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (see Revelation 3:17).

HOW HAS THE AMERICAN CHURCH FAILED?

The obvious question to ask is how the American church, which once appeared so strong and robust, could fail so spectacularly. In his book *Bad Religion*, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat describes an ascendant American church in the postwar years. This included a vibrant Catholic Church led by figures like Bishop Fulton Sheen, a famous TV evangelist for the Roman Church, and a rising evangelical movement led by the famous traveling preacher Billy Graham. So how did we go from *that* to the current state of the church in what is, historically speaking, a short period of time? How has the American church failed so spectacularly so quickly?

While that may be the question American Christians *want* to ask, it is the wrong question. The American church, Catholic and evangelical alike, has produced politically opportunistic people who are de facto moral relativists and are largely ignorant of the teachings of the faith. Given that, we *could* ask why these movements have failed to produce deeply pious Christians impressed with the image of Christ and given to love of God and neighbor. But it is probably better to ask if these churches were ever designed to produce such a thing in the first place.

In *The Sacrifice of Africa*, the Ugandan Roman Catholic priest and scholar Emmanuel Katongole begins by surveying the state of modern African politics before turning to a familiar trope among many of the continent’s observers: why has the political system failed so spectacularly in postcolonial Africa? Katongole’s answer to that question is as incisive as it is surprising. “What makes you think it has *failed*?” he asks his readers.

[Recommendations to improve the existing political systems in Africa] do not pay sufficient attention to the possibility that politics in Africa, and the nation-state in particular, have not been a failure, but have worked very well. Chaos, war, and corruption are not indications of a failed institution; they are ingrained in the very imagination of how nation-state politics works.⁸

In other words, rampant civil war, economic inequality, and failing public institutions may not be proof that politics have failed in sub-Saharan Africa. Rather, they may be proof that the existing political institutions have done what they were designed to do, which is enrich the few and exploit the many. Though the last names of “the few” changed at the end of colonialism, the underlying narrative about politics did not change, and so the results stayed the same. And by the standards of the established political narrative the results were a great success.

Something like this principle holds true for American Christianity as well. The American Catholic Church began to lust after mainstream respectability not long after the end of World War II. Indeed, they rallied to support a candidate for president, John F. Kennedy, who publicly acknowledged that he would not govern according to the teachings of the Church. The speech Kennedy gave in 1960 to Baptist pastors on the separation of church and state aligns well with accepted American beliefs about the separation of church and state, but it is hard to square with the teaching of the Roman Church which has, since the medieval era, held that the pope has authority over both the spiritual realm and the temporal, which includes questions of politics.⁹ Yet such was the desire for mainstream acceptability among American Catholics that they found it easier to abandon clear church teaching than to maintain fidelity to the dogma of the Church.

From the 1970s onward, American evangelicalism has been prone to the same errors. At bottom, the recent evangelical movement has been designed to do two things: first, grow churches through innovative worship practices and uncritically adopting the cultural garb of suburban Middle America. Second, to secure political power through an alliance with the Republican Party.¹⁰ These are the programs of the seeker-sensitive movement and the Religious Right, respectively.

Thus the idea that the mass endorsement of President Trump or the ascent of heterodox celebrity pastors whose own moral lives are often disasters would represent *failures* in American evangelicalism is simply disconnected from the reality of the movement.

An old joke can sum up the failure nicely: It’s said that Thomas Aquinas was once brought into a great city where he was to meet the

pope. He saw huge churches, clerics in ornate garb, and great armies lined up to defend the church's rule. And as he took all this in, the pope looked at him and said, "No more can St. Peter say 'silver and gold have I none,'" referencing the story in Acts 3 where Peter says those words to a lame man begging to be healed. "Indeed," responds Thomas, "but neither can he say, 'rise, take up your bed and walk.'" In the years since World War II the American church has consistently chosen to chase power, prestige, and mainstream status. We have gained all of those things.

The tragedy, of course, is that those are the very things that Jesus warns us about so frequently in the Gospels. A movement designed to obtain power and prestige and status will end up where Jesus predicted it would and where the American church *has* ended up. Modern American Christianity was never intended to produce morally upright people given to sacrificial love of neighbor. If it were intended to do that, we would not continue to restore discredited, unrepentant leaders to roles of authority within the movement.

Consider the aftermath of Tullian Tchvidjian's fall from grace in 2015, after he was caught in an extramarital affair. As the story slowly leaked out it became apparent that the rot ran deep. Tchvidjian had, by then, already been engaged in theological controversy over his views on the law and gospel. Many critics, rightly, called his views "antinomian," which is a Christian heresy that rejects all positive use of the law in the Christian life. Unsurprisingly, moral failure accompanied his aberrant theology. Tchvidjian's wife had actually had an affair before he himself did, and then he had *multiple* affairs. Yet after all of this, the Anglican writer Paul Zahl said of Tchvidjian, "I would go so far as to say that Tullian's personal experience, as bad as you want to make it out, has qualified him (and qualified him brilliantly!) to preach the Gospel."¹¹

Tchvidjian, of course, is not the only pastor who has resurfaced after being caught in grave sin. Ted Haggard and the aforementioned Mark Driscoll have followed similar trajectories. Indeed, there is almost a sense in which failures of this sort have become a mark of honor—they prove your authenticity, that you really are human and broken just like the rest of us.

The Catholic Church is, again, no better as the restoration of serial abuser Cardinal Theodore McCarrick under Pope Francis made abundantly clear. The American Catholic Church desired wealth and needed fundraisers to secure that wealth. Both the liberal McCarrick and the conservative Marcial Maciel could use their ability to raise money as a protective armor that allowed them to get away with sexual abuse for decades.

The same lesson applies in politics: American Christians have long adopted the practice of looking the other way when one of their favored political leaders fails. Former governor of South Carolina Mark Sanford took a brief break from politics after the popular Religious Right icon was caught in an extramarital affair. But after only a couple years away, he returned to run for the House of Representatives—and white conservative Christians in South Carolina enthusiastically supported him. Similarly Louisiana politician David Vitter survived scandal after being caught in an extramarital affair. Far from being a surprise, the capitulation to Donald Trump was almost inevitable, particularly when considering the fears that conservative Christians had about the ongoing viability of their dominant institutions.

Far from being evidence of our movement's failure, the current state of American Christianity is proof that our movement has succeeded spectacularly, if by *succeed* we mean "done what it was intended to do."

In the final pages of his great epic *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien writes of his heroes, Sam and Frodo, and their desperate quest to reach the cursed Mount Doom to cast the ring of power, a device that held much of the dark lord Sauron's power, into the fires and destroy it. As they came closer to the mountain, their situation grew more desperate. They were wasting away physically, Frodo's spirit was failing, and their quest seemed hopeless. In a key moment, Sam attempts to encourage Frodo by asking him if he remembers the taste of strawberries and cream, the sound of water, the beauties of spring in their far-off home, the Shire. This should be instructive to us. Love of small things, fidelity to small places, these are the things that matter and ultimately enable great deeds of courage.

For Christians, this means an ordinary delight in the created gifts of God should nourish our piety and our daily lives: the look of clouds on a stormy spring day, the delight of a good glass of red wine, the feel of wind blowing against our cheek as we walk in the created world spoken into being by God. It also means delighting in the ordinary means of grace that God offers to us, the preached Word of God, and the blessed sacrament given to us by a generous God who, as Calvin said, accommodates himself to our limitations. A simple life of work and prayer in a particular place among a beloved people is all that God's people need aspire to. And when we aspire to something beyond this hidden fidelity, it doesn't take long for things to go sideways.

Near the end of Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*, the protagonist, the small-town Kentucky barber the book is named for, asks himself if the many sacrifices he has made and opportunities he has let pass by so that he could live his simple life in a small place were worth it. What did it get him? He answers, "I got to live with love in my heart."

We might say the failure of evangelicalism is that we have forgotten the taste of strawberries and cream, and so have not lived with love in our hearts. And we are now passing into a well-deserved exile.

But even in exile, there is hope.

YEAST WITHOUT STRENGTH

The tragedy of the decline of the American church cannot be limited only to the lives of practicing Christians. The effects reach far beyond that. The Proverbs tell us that when the righteous prosper, the city rejoices. A rising church lifts all boats, you might say.

The martyred El Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero understood this well. Citing the parable of the yeast in the dough, Romero said that

Bakers know how the little bit of yeast that is placed within the dough leavens the entire mass. This is what Christians should be: the smidgens of yeast that go on to transform their families, their neighborhoods, their communities, their towns, the entire country, the world! But now we are yeast without strength, and that is why we have not been able to leaven the mass.¹²

The trouble, of course, is that yeast works quietly and gradually. You must be patient. But American Christians, and evangelicals especially, lack this patience. And it isn't just Christians who suffer as a result. When we turn to the broader question of public life in America, we find that the American republic is faring no better than the American church. Though by some measures the American economy is strong and robust, that strength has primarily benefited a select few. The masses have been left behind. Moreover, there is real reason to worry that the problem may get far worse in the near future as automation threatens what few underpaying jobs still remain for working-class Americans. The largest employer in many states is the trucking industry, and it may prove particularly susceptible to automation as self-driving trucks cause truckers to become unemployed and robots and advanced software similarly drive gas station attendants and warehouse workers out of their jobs. That transformation alone could eliminate millions of American jobs.

But the malaise is not purely economic. As noted in the introduction, sociologists have coined a new term, *deaths of despair*, to describe the skyrocketing number of deaths due to suicide, drug overdose, or alcoholism occurring in much of rural America and now beginning to become more common in American cities. Similarly, loneliness is on the rise as three-fourths of Americans report having two or fewer close friends they can share their great joys and anxieties with. Today's American teen is more anxious than ever before. In his inaugural address President Trump spoke of American carnage. There is little reason to think the president understands this carnage in any deep way or that he has a plan to address it. But that it exists is clear to even the most foolish among us, as his address makes plain.

In such a world the Christian church could be a powerful force for good. Liberated Christians, set free to a life of service and sacrifice by the death and resurrection of Christ, could be the glue that holds homes, neighborhoods, and companies together. The great English poet W. H. Auden once said in a letter to a Christian friend that if it were not for “a few like you,” he would have been lost to despair. This is the ministry the church could have.

Indeed, one of the tragic ironies of today's evangelicalism particularly is that its theological predecessors, the great Reformers of sixteenth-century Europe, often critiqued the established church precisely because it had become decadent and indifferent to the poor. The Strasbourgh Reformer Martin Bucer's first published book was titled *That No One Should Live for Himself but for Others*. Martin Luther raised many similar concerns with the Catholic Church. In his pamphlet "Address to the German Nobility," Luther repeatedly describes how the Roman Catholic Church exploited German peasants to enrich themselves, sending fraudulent preachers like John Tetzel to manipulate the poor into giving money to extravagant church projects. These early evangelicals rightly saw that a Christian faith that wasn't good news for the masses was not good news at all. And they called their followers to reform the Church such that it could, again, proclaim that message so its members would pour themselves out for their neighbors.

The bad news is that for the most part today's American Christians have come to look like the corrupt, self-satisfied, rich Roman Church of the late medieval era. The good news is that even now we can find a few small places where this gospel of self-sacrifice is being embraced and practiced.

In my hometown of Lincoln, the city's largest and most successful homeless shelter is run by a Pentecostal pastor who gave up a lucrative career in the business world to become a minister with the particular goal of loving and helping the poor.

A friend of mine runs a successful architecture firm that employed a number of people prior to the housing collapse in 2008. Even in the midst of that collapse, which saw almost all of the firm's work dry up, my friend paid the salaries of his employees from his personal funds for as long as he could afford to do so. He lost his house in the process, but his employees had a paycheck for far longer than almost anyone else in their field precisely because of the Spirit-empowered generosity of a good Christian man.

One of the best examples of this is the work of John Perkins and the Christian Community Development Association. After being

nearly beaten to death by a white policeman during the civil rights movement, Perkins dedicated his life to the work of reconciliation in American cities. The organization he founded, CCDA, has proven instrumental in bringing peace where once there was violence and pain. The organization has grown to nearly ten thousand members and over a thousand partner organizations, most of which work in impoverished urban settings.¹³

Even so, the dominant narrative of our age remains one of decadence, an aimless and meaningless search after wealth and power for no reason save one's own personal peace and affluence, as the evangelist Francis Schaeffer anticipated nearly fifty years ago.¹⁴ The result has been a rending in the fabric of the American republic. In such a time of chaos and mistrust, reconciliation is badly needed. And the church has, Scripture tells us, been given precisely such a ministry.

But the story of reconciliation runs counter to not only the story currently ascendant in America but the story that has for too long been dominant in the American church. Because we have mostly forgotten that in God's economy the way up is the way down, we have been too eager to measure ourselves by worldly standards of success and therefore have forgotten the story told in Scripture of God's people. In that story we are told that God's people are brought to life by God and called to a certain sort of life in his world. In their book *Reconciling All Things*, Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice tell this alternative story well:

There are two movements in [the Christian] story and the order is important. The first movement is about God and what God has done in Christ. The second is about the transformation this first movement has enacted in the world and in the lives of people.

Already we see that one way of misreading this story about reconciliation is to immediately bring ourselves into the picture. In our action-infected world, we are tempted to first ask what we must do, jumping into action without dwelling on the gift God gives. But the story of 2 Corinthians 5 reminds us that before reconciliation is about us, it is about God. It is God's mission in the world.¹⁵

They continue later,

We begin by attending to the story of God. We remember it in worship. We tell it to our children. We memorize its most poignant phrases and ask where God wants to speak them again through us. . . . Because a Christian vision of reconciliation is rooted in the story of God's people, we can grasp the vision only as we learn to inhabit the story. The story shapes us in the habits of God's peculiar people; the more we get it down inside us, the easier it is to resist the temptations of this world's prevailing visions.¹⁶

And this brings me back to Havelock. The gift I received there was a picture that told me in no uncertain terms that nothing was more important than loving Jesus. And loving Jesus did not mean a life of comfort and wealth; it meant a life of sacrifice and difficulty, but also of beauty and joy. I grew up on stories of beloved family members who exemplified the quiet virtues of Christian love.

My grandfather Bert worked a blue-collar railroad job for thirty-five years to support a sick wife and his three kids. On one occasion, he was caught between two boxcars and broke several ribs. But he didn't have any saved time off and so the next day he was back on the job. His family needed him. Mom tells me she never once heard him complain. This is a picture of Christian sacrifice, of the quiet fidelity of an ordinary man who blessed his family and his neighborhood with his constancy.

My great-grandmother Elise, who we met in the introduction, was an immigrant farmwife living on rented land in the early twentieth century, married to an admirable Swedish man who worked hard but was prone to bouts of depression. You already heard about his first suicide attempt the night before their wedding. It was not his last. In the mid-1920s he went out on a stormy night and used a ladder to climb up a power plant near Oakland. From the ladder he grabbed an exposed wire. The shock nearly killed him, and it caused all the power in the town to go out. In the aftermath of that attempt on his life, Grandma Elise cared for the entire family and the farm, making sure that the boys (including a young grandpa Bert) did the farm work that their father was not able to do while he was recovering. And through it all she maintained a rich devotional life. Bert could recall till the day he died the sight of his mother

sitting quietly in a rocking chair as he came downstairs at sunrise to begin chores. She was reading her Bible and singing beloved hymns in her native Swedish. Elise held a family together through her simple faith in God. And her descendants are still feeling the impact of that nearly one hundred years later.

My mother has taken care of my dad, who suffered a traumatic brain injury in December 2015, round the clock ever since that awful day. Dad spent two weeks in a coma in the ICU after a drug complication caused a massive bleed on his brain, which caused his brain to actually shift eight centimeters inside his skull. Doctors told us he may not make it, and not long before he miraculously woke up one doctor suggested that we begin planning a funeral.

But Dad woke up.

For me and everyone who knows my parents, the past several years have been an extended object lesson in the patient endurance of the Christian, the call to a life of sacrifice for the good of the beloved, and the steady hope in a future resurrection. About a year after his injury, my parents were talking and realized that they had both come to a similar conclusion about Dad's injury: through their suffering they had gained more than they had lost. Dad had mostly lost the use of his left hand, lost virtually all of his independence, and lost the ability to hunt and to work around the house. Mom lost much of her independence as well. And they both lost a good bit of money as their sole source of income became the combined benefits of an employer provided long-term disability plan and state-provided Social Security payments. And yet for all that, they both saw that the things they gained through that difficulty, most notably a greater dependence on God and a deeper patience and love for God's people, somehow exceeded what they had lost.

This call to hidden fidelity does not mean there are no broader ramifications of the Christian faith. I have already said that there are. But it means a church that loses hidden faith will not be able to sustain public faith. It will, rather, become what the Pharisees were in Jesus' own day—whitewashed tombs, cups scrubbed clean on the outside but filthy on the inside. Scripture teaches us plainly that “man looks on the outward

appearance, but God looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7 NKJV) The failure of the American church is that we have become indifferent to the heart. This is because fidelity of the heart will compel us toward an external fidelity that is frequently uncomfortable, demanding, and dangerous.

At a funeral Mass for a friend of Archbishop Romero who was murdered by the government because of her faith in Christ, Romero invited those present to follow this Lord who died, this God who sacrificed himself for others, this obscure Israelite teacher who, we confess, is the hope of the world. Holding the host aloft, he said, “May this body that was immolated and this flesh that was sacrificed for humankind also nourish us so that we can give our bodies and our blood to suffering and pain, as Christ did, not for our own sake but to bring justice and peace to our people.”¹⁷

Moments later a shot echoed through the chapel.

Romero fell to the ground. He was dead within minutes.

But the gospel tells us that a life sacrificed for others yields a crop. “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25 NKJV).

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