CHURCHES FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS



Protected: John Haralson Spiritual Autobiography

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What story am I co-authoring with God?

I am a heart-centered disciple of Jesus with big dreams and desires who has consistently obeyed God's call into the unknown. I have learned to be attentive to my own soul and story and have profoundly experienced the life-giving transformation of God.

I am a veteran congregational pastor who has honed my craft through nearly 30 years of serving in the post-Christian ministry environments of New York City, San Francisco, and Seattle. In these contexts, I have consistently adopted, contextualized, and implemented a centered set, love-your-neighbor philosophy of ministry.

I have led our congregation to become an "uncloistered monastery" through the intersection of rich biblical teaching, contemplative prayer, vibrant

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I am a father, both biologically and spiritually, to many amazing people. As a father, I seek to connect personally with those under my care and root them in the love of God. As a leader of leaders, I call out the gifts of others, equipping and blessing them to join God in his good kingdom work.

"I've got to leave to find my way."—R.E.M.

Growing up in South Carolina, I had never been beyond the Mississippi River, yet the beauty and mythology of the American West spoke deeply to my soul.

The day I left home for basic training at the Air Force Academy, I pressed my eyes against the airplane window and took in the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains. I felt at home for the first time and was electrified with joy, anticipation, and more than a little bit of fear.

Although I didn't know it then, my desire for adventure and beauty was at its core a longing for God.

Meeting Jesus

As a cadet at the Air Force Academy, I studied hard and partied harder. Yet even in my less-than-sober moments, I knew my life had something to do with God. Growing up, I had a nominal faith, but I sensed being called to something far more meaningful.

There were two memorable Christians in my squadron—Sara and Rory. They lived their faith openly and honestly. They weren't overbearing or fake, and their lives were deeply alluring to me.

Through their steady and life-giving witness and the somewhat reluctant faithfulness of another Christian friend who I begged to tell me about Jesus, I came to faith in the same year I was commissioned as an Air Force officer.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."—Apostle Paul

God gave me an immense hunger for his word. Now stationed in Georgia, I began to study the Bible ravenously. I read J.I. Packer's *Knowing God* in a matter of days and pored over commentaries most nights. I recalled from a political philosophy class that John Calvin was a well-known Christian thinker,

In addition to working with teenagers, I led some adult Bible studies and preached on occasion at my church. I enjoyed the work immensely and people encouraged me to consider a life of vocational ministry.

An emerging vision

As a new Christian, I had a lot of non-Christian friends—mostly coworkers and rugby teammates. I had no idea how to interact with them as a follower of Jesus without being weird or erasing myself to blend in.

A friend from church used to get Tim Keller's sermon cassettes (it was the early '90s!) from Redeemer in New York City. He would listen and then pass them along to me.

I was mesmerized.

Here was a historically orthodox church in the heart of a large, secular city, seeking to be faithful to the Lord while being loving and intelligible to their neighbors. Their overarching desire was to point people to Jesus while not majoring in minors. Additionally, Redeemer was unique among churches in my circles in that they also placed a high priority on mercy and justice.

This combination of a centered set and kingdom-oriented missiological vision has stayed with me to this day.

"Go to seminary, it won't hurt you."

After a devastating broken engagement, my Air Force commitment was drawing to a close. I felt like God might be calling me into ministry, but I was emotionally gutted. I sought out my pastor for advice, and he spoke those life-giving words to me.

So, in the summer of 1994, I separated from the Air Force and headed to Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. I wasn't exactly sure where my life was headed, but I knew in my bones that this was the next step for me.

The Refiner's fire

With the seminary community as a wonderful dialog partner, I threw myself headlong into wrestling with some of my intellectual questions about the truthfulness of Christianity. I read Nietzsche, Descartes, the Bhagavad Gita,

Does…God…love…me?

My faith was being tested and purified. God was separating the wheat from the chaff in my life.

"You overwhelm me, but I don't trust myself."

Linn asked me where our relationship was going, and this was my response. We were in that purgatorial space of "Is this dating, or are we just hanging out?" She rightly wanted clarity.

I was in awe of her—her intellect, her being a force of nature, and her deep and profound love of God. She also had amazing dimples and brilliant curly hair!

But, it had only been two years since I walked out of the smoking crater of a broken engagement. I didn't want to hurt someone again, and I wasn't sure how to proceed.

I had a deep-seated fear that voicing such doubts would lead Linn to bail.

About six months after that conversation, we got married.

Although we barely knew each other, we followed God together into our future.

"Come to me, all who are weary and burdened. And I will give you rest."—Jesus

About a year into our marriage, Linn and I attended a "Sonship" weekend. Sonship was a course developed for missionaries and pastors who weren't really experiencing God's love. In other words, it was tailor-made for people like me.

It was during this weekend that I finally started believing that:

God…actually…loved…me.

I was finally free from guilt, shame, and condemnation. I exhaled and held my head high for the first time in years.

Funny thing though—my dreams aren't necessarily Linn's dreams.

However, I wouldn't take no for an answer. I grieve deeply as I write this now, but I even threw in a couple of Bible verses about men being the heads of families to justify the unilateral decision to move to New York.

I was walking in the footsteps of Abraham and Sarah when they enlisted the help of Hagar. Like them, I had a true calling from God. Yet, I was also unwilling to wait on the Lord for his calling to be fulfilled in his time. I took matters into my own hands, wounding my wife deeply in the process.

Our two years in New York were a hard season of having my sins exposed and uprooted. Yet, I was slowly learning how to love Linn more than I loved my calling.

"Jesus wouldn't have gotten 95% of the vote here."

After four years in San Francisco serving as an associate pastor helping a thriving church plant become a self-governing congregation, I began to sense a call to become a senior pastor. That ultimately led me to Grace Seattle.

After the pastoral search committee vetting process, the congregation had to vote to extend me a call. At the time, they were still traumatized from a pastoral termination and a devastating church split.

Conventional wisdom says that you want the vote to be at least 95% in your favor before you accept a call.

I got 83%.

While Linn and I were praying about what to do, one of the church's staff members chimed in with the memorable statement above.

Strangely to many close to us, we felt called by God to come to Seattle. And on New Year's Day, 2004, we drove north on I-5 to start the next chapter.

"But what they never really tell you / When they tell you it's so hard / Is that it's hard"—The Welcome Wagon

The early years at Grace were a slog. We had three children under the age of four. And, on top of our "fixer-upper" church, we bought a "fixer-upper"

Two years in, we were at our wit's end. I told Linn that we could walk away, move into her parents' basement in Nashville, and sort it out from there.

A few weeks later, Linn had a vision while praying in our living room. Jesus told her that he loved her. He also told her that he wanted us to stay in Seattle.

Jesus' words to Linn formed a bedrock for us both.

God was faithful through the difficulties, and continued to shape and form the church—and us—in beautiful ways.

"It is in solitude that this inner freedom can grow."—Henri Nouwen

In 2013, our long-time associate pastor moved to Brooklyn to plant a church. When it came time to replace him, I intuitively felt that we needed to pivot. Specifically, I sensed that God wanted all of us—myself included—to grow in new and different ways in our relationships with him.

The Lord brought a woman to our staff who was a spiritual director. She brought the riches of the contemplative tradition to our congregation. I wasn't even sure I knew what the contemplative tradition was, but I knew she could help lead us to where we needed to go.

It was like discovering electricity.

Through resources like *lectio divina*, the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, and therapy, I and many others began to be healed by the Lord in life-giving ways. We were learning how to walk with Jesus and one another, and it profoundly transformed our church.

The uncloistered monastery

Non-Christians in Seattle don't tend to ask the question, "How do I get right with God?" Instead, they are focusing on building lives filled with meaning, connectedness, and beauty. Theologically speaking, Seattleites aren't asking questions of justification. Instead, they are much more interested in sanctification, formation, and communion. Couple this reality with the heartbreaking and very public tragedy that was Mars Hill, and it is easy to understand why skepticism towards the Church abounds here.

And, our rich communion with God gives us the ability to connect deeply and honestly with one another.

This rich interior and communal life, however, is not just something we keep to ourselves. Each week, after being fed at the Lord's Table, we are sent out into the world to love our neighbors and work for the common good of our city. Our Serving the City ministry, which helps mobilize our congregation to care for the hurting and marginalized in Seattle, has become a foundational pillar of the life and work of our church.

Wounded healers

When I started going deeper with the Lord into my own heart and story, I began to make some profound discoveries. God had given me big desires and big dreams, and my path to discipleship meant I could joyfully embrace who God made me to be.

I also discovered some pretty shameful things about myself.

Although there have been acts of violence against African Americans for over 400 years in our country, the Mother Emanuel massacre in 2015 woke me up to the ways that I had been complicit in systemic racism.

It was startling for me. I mean, growing up in South Carolina, I knew real racists, and I thought I wasn't one of them.

Turns out I was wrong.

That event, however, led to my own deepening repentance and altered the course of our church's life.

We began to lean into hard questions of racial justice, educating and challenging our mostly white congregation. We brought an African-American associate pastor to our staff, who I served alongside for five years. It was through his leadership that our congregation learned how to move towards our city's pain and brokenness in new and exciting ways. God was getting bigger to us.

Posture shift

When one of our children was in 9th grade, they came out to us as gay. It was

We blamed ourselves, blamed Seattle's progressive culture, and grieved for a long time. Thankfully, God provided a rich community for us as we sought to find the way forward.

As we journeyed with our child, I began to see my own deeply ingrained biases. Though I am settled in my convictions about marriage being between one man and one woman, I have begun to realize how I had singled out the LGBTQ+ community and treated them worse than I had treated many other groups of people and failed to appropriately honor them as image bearers.

The path we have been on hasn't changed our church's theology. But, it has changed our posture towards our LGBTQ+ friends, neighbors, and family members.

The compass rose and C4SO

As a direct result of our congregation's desire to recognize, bless, and empower women in the church, the walls begin to close in on us in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)—a fellowship I still dearly love. Our leadership grew weary of spending our energy defending ourselves and, so 2019, we began to prayerfully consider finding a new denominational home.

As we discerned and sought the Lord, words like "spacious" and "tailwind" began to emerge.

As part of that process, we read Thomas McKenzie's book, *The Anglican Way*. His description of the Anglican compass rose was a mic-drop moment. In that rich image, we saw a clear reflection of our own church, where the varied gifts of the body were held together by Christ.

Could we have found our tribe? Had this congregation of orphaned believers found a family that would give us life?

Furthermore, as we explored different dioceses, the vision, values, and people of C4SO stood out to us as a divinely ordained fit. The more we learned and the more people we met, the more this sense was confirmed. So, in the spring of 2022, we left the PCA and became a C4SO congregation.

In many ways, this realignment has felt like a homecoming for us and for me. From having the support of our bishops and having fellowship and

Leaning into fatherhood

In the fall of 2022, Bishop Todd ordained me as an Anglican priest. One of my good friends immediately started calling me “Father John.”

Fatherhood—biologically and spiritually— is something central to the calling God has placed on my life. As a father, the most significant thing I can do is to help root others in their heavenly Father and the love He has for them.

As a Father, I believe in others and call out the gifts God has given them. I support, build, and lead so that their gifts can be used and they can find their own place in God’s mission. I also cheer on and celebrate the people under my care for who they are.

There is a saying in the therapy world:

You become who you needed.

I didn’t have the support, coaching, and mentoring I needed—so I came into adulthood with a distinct limp. Over the years, I have learned that one of the most life-giving things I can do is to help others tap into the dreams and desires God has for them.

In other words, this big dreamer is learning how to help others dream big.

On being a bishop

I do not know what God has in store for me or C4SO. If I am not elected, I will continue to joyfully serve the Lord as Rector of Grace Church Seattle.

If elected, I have a vision for the kind of bishop I would like to be. A friend of mine came across a Catholic graveyard in Chicago. A bishop’s headstone said this:

For you, we are bishops.

With you, we are Christians.

I would aspire to be the kind of bishop who could live up to that high calling, and I believe the story God is writing with my life could be preparing me to do that very thing.

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