

# AColyte

Lent 2014

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things  
at Austin College



## **WARNING:**

What follows are 7841 words about the Season of Lent, Christian Theology, and a Texas singer/songwriter.

# **ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK**

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AColyte

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# **Congratulations!**

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## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

As the Days Begin to Lengthen  
Between Ashes and Empty Tombs

*I'm not a bad guy  
I just write these little songs.*  
--Ray Wylie Hubbard

*Who ever heard of Lake Alan Jackson?*  
--Gary P. Nunn

Last November, my friend Bonnie Edwards invited me to come and lead a Lenten Study at First Presbyterian Church in Dallas this Spring.

Three things influenced me as I tried to figure out how best to structure the Lenten study:

1. Through the years, several ACTivators and I have spent many happy evenings playing songs around campfires with some members of FPC, Dallas – so I know that at least a few of their members and I share a peculiar taste in music.

2. I found a book by a Presbyterian scholar I really respect that says:

*[Lent] enables us to reflect on our ministries, our Life with God, and ways God may be calling us to move into the future.*

--Donald McKim, *Illuminating Lent*

3. In my seminary Senior Preaching class 27 years ago, the professor told us that good preachers should cultivate an appreciation for “keen observers of life.” Keen observers of life see things and think about things and express things in unique, fresh, and useful ways.

So I put those elements together – peculiar campfire music, reflection on our life with God, and “keen observers of life” – and ended up with

# The Gospel according to Ray Wylie Hubbard

Ray is a singer-songwriter who was born in Oklahoma and grew up in Dallas.

His most popular and widely-known songs are probably *Snake Farm* and *Up Against the Wall, Redneck Mother*.

He shows up in Sherman every couple years, and he and I have occasionally had conversations that I would call “theological.” (In my opinion, any conversation about what really matters is “theological”).

As is evident from the photo above, Ray is not a typical, run-of-the-mill, church-going Texan, but he often uses biblical, religious, and spiritual imagery in his songs. He thinks (and sings) a lot about “what really matters.”

So I spent four Wednesdays during Lent with some old friends and new friends in Dallas looking at some relevant passages of Scripture, listening to some of Ray’s songs, and talking about four major themes of Christianity.

## Repentance

“Repentance” literally means “turning around.”

Luke 15:11-21 is a classic “repentance” story and a key passage for understanding Ray’s theological perspective.

*Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."'*

Ray didn't release any records between 1984 and 1992. That was a period in which he faced some issues related to alcohol and drugs and spent time in a detox/rehab program.

He wrote this song in 1994.

My last name is Younger. I am a last Younger Son.  
The name I was given was Luke 15:21

(Luke 15:21 –

*Then the son said to him,*

*"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;*

*I am no longer worthy to be called your son.")*

3 days of thunder. 3 days of rain.  
I come to be in this world with a number and a name.

My last name is Younger. I am a last younger son.  
I stand as a witness to the things I have done  
And I have caused sorrow, yet I too have been pained  
You cannot be in this world and not get stained

My last name is Younger. I am a last younger son.  
I once had beliefs, but now I have none.  
There's no forgiveness for old guns and knives  
Perhaps it is fitting we don't recall our past lives

My last name is Younger. I am a last younger son.  
There is a secret I never told anyone  
Sometimes I see something in a few certain eyes  
And I behold the future of how and when a man dies

Now watch this:

My last name is Younger. I am a last younger son.  
I won't get no older than the age of 21  
As I look in the mirror I see the **future once more**  
An **old friend** is waiting just beyond a closed door.

I've never talked to Ray about this particular song. But he pretty clearly identifies with the Prodigal Son. And, as the highlighted words indicate, there's at least a hint of redemption at the end.

Luke 15:21 (*Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."*) is a good place for us to start a Lenten conversation.

The official Presbyterian Church (USA) resource on Lent says:

*The Lenten journey from the ashes of death to resurrected life begins on the first day of Lent, Ash Wednesday, which signifies a time to turn around, to change direction, to repent. This first day of Lent reminds us that unless we are willing to die to our old selves, we cannot be raised to new life with Christ.*

--PC(USA) Supplemental Liturgical Resource 7, "The Liturgical Year"

*The Last Younger Son* is about repentance; dying to the old self.

It's about recognizing and admitting that

- We've done things we shouldn't have done and
- Failed to do things we should have done.

Lent is a time for us all to recognize and remember that we're all younger sons.

It's a time for individual and corporate repentance; for recognizing the distance and difference between who we are and who we could and should be.

That's not a comfortable place to be.

But here we are.

## Repentance: Supplication

Psalm 130 says

- 1 *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.*
- 2 *Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!*
- 3 *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?*
- 4 *But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.*
- 5 *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;*
- 6 *my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.*
- 7 *O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.*
- 8 *It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.*

The Psalmist is in a bad place. But at least he knows who he's talking to. He's got access to some good theological vocabulary.

"Lord"  
"Forgiveness"  
"Hope"  
"Steadfast Love"  
"Power to redeem."

Ray's got a song that's reminiscent of Psalm 130.

He wrote it in 1994, after his detox/rehab time.

I used to take comfort from the loneliness with whiskey  
It tore up my soul and it turned against me  
I stood at the fire with my hand on the knife  
Didn't have a prayer to save my life

I stood at the crossroads with tears in my eyes  
I'd come as far as I could bring me. I couldn't live and I could not die  
There was darkness all around me, no sun up in the sky  
Didn't have a prayer to save my life

I wasn't looking for something to fall from the sky  
I'd heard it all before; I couldn't take no more lies.  
I wasn't looking for nothing but love from the start  
So tired of running; so low inside  
So tired of running; so low inside  
I need to get me, I got to find me,  
I got to have me a little peace in my heart

I've stood in rags; blinded by the dust of pride  
Poisoned by my own cold, cold heart and the shallow reign of my life  
In the distance there was thunder. I saw the lightning strike twice.  
I threw out a little prayer. I threw out a little prayer  
Threw out a little prayer, not expecting a reply

The Psalmist seems to be in a similar place ("*Out of the depths I cry to you*") but the Psalmist expects an answer.

Ray wasn't as sure ("*I threw out a little prayer, not expecting a reply.*"). But he wrote the song. Part of repentance is asking for help.

That's supplication: a prayer asking for help for oneself.

## Repentance: Confession

1 Timothy 1:8-16 says

*Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.*

“Blasphemer.” “Persecutor.” “Man of violence.”

Paul is confessing. He’s acknowledging the distance between who he was and who could/should have been.

Ray has a song called, *Conversation with the Devil*. It’s long, funny, and fun. But look for the subtle note of real confession.

I had a dream last night I was cast into Hell  
by a jealous God  
The Devil walked up and said,



"You don't need no lightning rod  
It hardly ever rains down here,  
I can't recall the last storm  
You ain't gonna need that leather jacket,  
it gets kinda warm  
But there's one way in there's no way out;  
it looks like you're here to stay  
The place is a mess, it's overcrowded,  
more are coming in everyday"

- Not a particularly uncommon image of judgment and Hell.

I said, "Oh man, wait a minute  
there's gotta be something wrong  
I ain't a bad guy,  
I just write these little songs  
I always pay my union dues,  
I don't stay in the passing lane"

- That's pretty basic Works Righteousness

And he said, "What about all that whiskey  
and the cocaine"  
I said, "Well, yeah,  
but that's no reason to throw me in Hell  
'Cause I didn't use the cocaine to get high  
I just liked the way it smelled"

- It's important for us to recognize the subtle element of confession in the lines. Repentance involves confession.
- There's also a rationalization like Adam's in Genesis 3:11-12

*[God] said,  
"Who told you that you were naked?  
Have you eaten from the tree of which  
I commanded you not to eat?"  
The man said,*

*"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."*

- Adam's saying, "It's not really my fault. You can't blame me."

He said, "Come on over here son,  
let me show you around  
Over there's where we put the preachers,  
I never liked those clowns  
They're always blaming me  
for everything wrong under the sun  
It ain't that harder to do what's right,  
it's just maybe not as much fun  
Then they walk around thinking  
they're better than me and you  
And then they get caught in a motel room  
Doing what they said not to do"

- That's not a bad indictment of religious hypocrisy.
- I don't think any of us think he's making that up.
- We can all think of examples that fit that behavior.

"Now the murderers and the rapists  
they go in this fiery lake  
As well as most of the politicians  
and the cops on the take  
And all the mothers who wait  
till they get to K-Mart to spank their kids  
And instead of showing 'em how to do what's right  
They just hit 'em for what they did  
And all the daddys who run off  
and abandon their daughters and sons  
Oh, anybody who hurts a child  
is gonna burn until it's done"

- Isn't this is reminiscent of 1 Timothy 1:8-10

- The Devil's list of inappropriate behaviors (murderers, rapists, etc.) is reminiscent of Paul's list of inappropriate behaviors in 1 Timothy 1:8-10 (godless, sinful, disobedient, etc.)

"Everybody is down here", I said  
 "Who's up in Heaven with God and the Son"  
 Oh, some saints and mystics  
 and students of metaphysics 101  
 People who care and share and love  
 and try to do what's right  
 Beautiful old souls who read little stories  
 to their babies every night  
 What you wont find up in Heaven are  
 Christian Coalition Right Wing Conservatives  
 Country program directors  
 and Nashville record executives

- I don't think Ray ever had many good experiences with Nashville.

Now I said, "I've made some mistakes,  
 but I'm not as bad as those guys  
 How can God do this to me  
 or can't He sympathize  
 He said, "You're wrong about God  
 being cruel and mean  
 Oh, God is the most loving thing  
 that's never been seen"

- It's interesting that Ray puts these words in the Devil's mouth.

I said, "Hotshot tell me this  
 which religion is the truest?"  
 He said, "They're all about the same  
 Buddha was not a Christian,  
 but Jesus would've made a good Buddhist"

Well, I thought about my future,  
 I didn't seem to have much of one  
 I looked around to leave

but there was no place to run  
I said, "I don't suppose  
I could go back and try living again  
You know like reincarnation,  
I hear that's the way it's always been"  
"I can't answer that", he said  
"You're gonna have to wait for that response  
But it's not any more unusual to be born twice  
than it is to be born once"

- Cf. earlier reference to "Metaphysics 101.
- He's right if you think about it.

Well, it looked like I was gonna be stuck here  
as far as I could tell  
I thought I might as well suck up,  
you know what the hell  
I said you, "You know that song  
that Charlie Daniels did  
About how you went down to Georgia  
and played fiddle against that kid"  
He said, "Yeah it broke my heart  
but you know what are you gonna do  
I said, "To tell you the truth  
I thought your solo was the better of the two"

- That's a great verse with no discernible theological connotations.

Well, then I woke up  
and I was lying in my bed  
I ran upstairs and kissed my little boy  
on his sleeping head  
I took this dream as a sign from God,  
so I thought I'd better pray  
I said, "Don't ever speak to me directly.  
Thanks anyway."

- Another great line.
- Now watch this:

Now so much has changed about me  
Besides me just giving up red meat  
Some get spiritual, 'cause they see the light  
And some, 'cause they feel the heat

- I think most of us – including Ray – are a little of both.

During Lent every year, Christians are reminded of God's call to us to repent;

*Repent and turn away from your idols.*

--Ezekiel 14:6

*Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin.*

--Ezekiel 18:30

*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

-Matthew 3:2, 4:17

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*

--Mark 1:15

*So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.*

--Mark 6:15

*Repent therefore, and turn to God.*

--Acts 3:9

To “repent” is to turn around; to intentionally and prayerfully turn away from the life-denying, selfish, short-sighted, arrogant, irresponsible behavior that is part of our lives.

And Christians like me think that, to do that, we need to pray and we need to confess.

Ray Wylie Hubbard is a keen observer of life who can help us think about what that might look like.

“I threw out a prayer...”

“Well, yeah...”

For folks in my tribe, repentance is part of the whole truth. It's the beginning of the Lenten journey. But there's a lot more to talk about.

## Faith/Believing

There's this weird story in John 3:1-17

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."*

- "You've got a little sumpin'-sumpin'"
- How do you do it?

*Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above."*

- Jesus is telling Nicodemus.
  - "You have to start over from the beginning"
  - "And see things from a new perspective"
  - "Through a different lens"

*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe*

- Here's that word "believe"
- That's an important word in this passage

*if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,*

- See Numbers 21:8-9

*And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

*so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him*

- There's that "believe" word again

*may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

John 20:30-31 says:

*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

- "believe/believing" again

Faith and believing are obviously very important biblical concepts.

After he got out of rehab (I think in 1992), Ray wrote this song:

I got this girl in trouble  
It was something I didn't mean to do

- Poor choices
- Irresponsible behavior
- Confession?

But I done the right thing, bought a wedding ring  
And then dropped out of school

- Repentance?

Said goodbye to the Cool Rockin' Cats  
Sold my amp; but not my Strat

A little twist of fate, things go like that

- Unintended consequences

But when I'm burning in my head and screaming at the night  
And a .410's all that's left—that can't be right  
When the deep river calls me, "Come on the other side"  
It takes a little faith not to take that ride

Things got crazy and the marriage broke up  
I guess it had to before it'd gone too far  
Put on my suit and I went to the court  
Sherry got the house; lawyer got the car  
Judge gets my paycheck and my alibis  
I get the pain and my kids gets the lies  
A little twist of fate and somebody cries

- More unintended consequences

But when I'm burning in my head and screaming at the night  
And a .410's all that's left—that can't be right  
When the deep river calls me, "Come on the other side"  
It takes a little faith not to take that ride

Look in the mirror and I got no reflection  
My drink is cold, but I taste the heat  
Outside expensive comforts are walkin'  
Not liking the lyric, but loving the beat  
I've got some scars that no one can see  
Some of them costly and some of them free  
A little twist of fate is all that it needs

- That guy's in hard place
- where he hadn't intended to be

But when I'm burning in my head and screaming at the night  
And a .410's all that's left—that can't be right  
When the deep river calls me, "Come on the other side"  
It takes a little faith not to take that ride

This character is obviously in anguish.

A .410 is a shotgun.



He's obviously tempted to do something radical, extreme.

But then he says "That can't be right."

How does he know?

Whatever leads him to conclude that there are better ways to respond to his situation than grabbing a shotgun, that's theology.

Theology involving asking the questions:

Which things matter more than other things?

and

How do we know?

## Belief

Habakkuk 1:1-4 and 2:1-3 says:

*The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.  
O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?  
Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?  
Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.  
So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.  
The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

*I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart;  
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,  
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.*

- There are seven first person singular pronouns in those 5 verses

*Then the Lord answered me and said:  
Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.  
For there is still a vision for the appointed time;  
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.  
If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.*

Read that.

Think about what put Habakkuk in that grumpy mood.

Keep in mind God's response to him.

And then read the words to this song that Ray Wylie Hubbard wrote in 1994:

Christopher turned 16 on a Chemical Dependency wing  
And on family week his momma come up and she says  
"I aint gonna stay for this whole thing  
'Cause I've got more important things to do  
than to listen to this ungrateful son."  
Chris says "If being a parent so tough  
Then how come just anybody can be one?"

Sweet Melissa she turned her first trick at seventeen  
For some backstreet passes  
and some hashish in the back of a limousine  
Now she's seen it all and she don't want to be here  
or even anywhere  
And at 22 she's got what the boys down at the VA  
call the "Thousand Yard Stare".

- Those are real stories from Ray's rehab experience

But the real trick  
Is to find a reason to believe in spite of all this  
and the big secret is  
What you're lookin' for you're lookin' with.

Miss Helen Petty she lost her husband of 42 years  
Now she don't know what to do with herself  
and she just can't seem to stop the tears.  
And she can't sleep at night  
She's so afraid and so alone  
And there are these bastards  
Who take advantage of these precious souls

Like there's this man on Sunday morning on TV  
Who jumps around and screams and shouts  
And he says to get me in to Heaven  
Is the only thing that he is about  
But to get there I've got to believe what he believes  
Well if that's the case  
I believe I'll take my chances when it's time for me to leave

But the real trick  
Is to find a reason to believe in spite of all this  
and the big secret is  
What you're lookin' for you're lookin' with.

We are all lengthening shadows cast by a sinking sun  
So we need to find this reason  
to believe in something or someone  
It's hard to accept these many things on faith alone  
We feel betrayed by life when the infidelity is our own

I don't concern myself with how Jesus was born  
or if he was raised from the dead.  
I believe what it comes down is the things that he said  
So many more than Judas have betrayed his name  
And this beautiful ancient wisdom  
Has been prostituted for personal gain

Ahh but the real trick  
is to find a reason to believe in spite of all of this  
And the big secret is  
What you're lookin' for, you're lookin' with

The Diagnosis:

Grumpy Habakkuk looks around and sees violence, wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, injustice, and wickedness.

During and after his period of personal difficulties, Ray looks around and sees drugs, indifferent parents, prostitution, addiction, loneliness, exploitation, hypocrisy, judgmentalism, uncertainty, and despair.

The Prescription:

God tells Habakkuk to "Write the Vision."

Ray says "The real trick is to find a reason to believe in spite of all this."

It's fair for those of us who take this stuff seriously to ask,

"Do we really have a vision to write?" and

"Do we really have a reason to believe in spite of all this?"

I think so.

Here's why:

In John 14:18-19, Jesus says,

*"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.  
In a little while the world will no longer see me,  
but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.*

Romans 8:38-39 says

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us  
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

And Ray has another song that goes like this:

She is Mother Maybelle Carter's wildwood flower

- Mother Maybelle Carter was a hugely influential country singer in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Mentioning her at the beginning of this song locates what follows in a particular community and tradition.

She walks like a spirit upon the earth  
Lost once without a trace  
Now she's grateful for the grace

- I think this is about Ray's wife

She stands and delivers what she's worth

She calls me her handsome High Plains Drifter

- Ray confesses to having been influenced by Clint Eastwood movies like "High Plains Drifter" and "Pale Rider"

She tells me I've got an old soul behind my eyes  
Like a fire in a thunderstorm  
She's a spark, divine and warm

- Isn't that a great line?

And I believe her when she tells me love never dies  
She says, "It's true—true love lasts forever  
And when there's no more wild ponies left to ride  
When the earth falls away  
And what's matter fades to gray  
True love is just as strong on the other side"

She is Marianne Faithful's broken English

- *Broken English* was a controversial 1979 Marianne Faithful album about drug addiction, redemption, and broken relationships

She tells me of a land where no one cries  
Where we're risen from the dust  
To place where there is no rust  
And I know for heaven's sake love never dies

She says, "It's true—true love lasts forever  
And when there's no more wild ponies left to ride  
When the earth falls away  
And what's matter fades to gray  
True love is just as strong on the other side"

When we Christian types spend Lent focusing on repentance and faith/belief, open our Bibles, and listen to some Ray Wylie Hubbard songs, I think we can get to a place where we recognize that, while sin and evil and suffering and abuse and death are clearly part of the whole truth, they're not the WHOLE truth.

Our "reason to believe in spite of all this" is that we live and act and articulate meaning in a story that recognizes not only

- Suffering,
- Evil,
- Sin, and
- Death

but also

- Forgiveness,
- Grace,
- Hope, and
- Sacrificial, Unconditional Love that Lasts Forever

In addition to Repentance, Faith is also an essential part of the Lenten journey.

It's important to articulate and remember "a reason to believe in spite of all of this."

And the key is to remember that we're not alone.

In classic Orthodox Christian theology, we recognize that "what we're looking for" (evidence of God's presence, reason to hope, strength to go on) "we're looking with" (Christ and Christ's body, the Church, the community of believers).

So it's repentance and faith in Lent, but it's also

## Gratitude

Psalms 106, 107, 118, 136 all start with the same verse:

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever*

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says:

*...give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Gratitude shows up in some interesting contexts in the Gospels (especially Luke).

Luke 17:11-19 says

*On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.*

*Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."*

The lepers were outcasts.

And then they weren't any more.

And at least one of them was grateful.

In the 1970s and 1980s Ray played fairly regularly at the Kerrville Folk Festival – a huge music festival in the Texas Hill Country. At some point during his turbulent years, he was invited not to return. He was a bit of an outcast, like the lepers in Matthew 17.

He got to go back and play there again in 1993.

This song is about that experience.

It has been a dream of mine to hold you in my arms  
To tell you that my love is true and shelter you from storms  
The road I chose a long time ago it led me from your door  
And now I am back from the shadows, rain  
and I cannot love you more.

If heaven is not a place to go but is a state of mind  
I'll hold you in my thoughts forever through all time.

You see a soul in a tattered hat  
who's been out there for awhile  
And in my trials I've walked through fire  
now I wait to share your smile

- Confession
- Yearning

I know my roads have all run out  
I have nothing but words it's true  
Perhaps I can rhyme a few of them in a song for you.

If heaven is not a place to go but is a state of mind  
I will hold you in my thoughts forever through all time.

Now there's a place within this world

it's precious and alive  
It is not distant and it is not far  
it's right before our eyes

- I went to the Kerrville Folk Festival every year from 1983 to 2003. It's an amazing place and I hope to go back again.

So take my hand and close your eyes  
and I will take you there  
Have a little faith and don't lose hope  
and it wouldn't hurt if you said a prayer.

- Those are vague but relevant biblical/spiritual references

If heaven is not a place to go but is a state of mind  
I will hold you in my thoughts forever through all time.

This song is not explicitly about gratitude, but I know from conversations with Ray that it's clearly an expression of gratitude and redemption similar to that of the Samaritan Leper in Luke 17:15-16

## Grateful Reflections and A Checkered Past

Then there's Luke 19:1-10:

*[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

When Zacchaeus vows to share his stuff and clean up his own messes, his motivation is not selfish. He doesn't change his behavior *so that* Jesus will notice him, treat him like more than just a lousy, stinking sinner, invite him to share his gifts, and go to his house. Jesus has already done that.



The motivation for Zach's change of behavior is not self-interest, it's gratitude. It's grateful response to what Jesus has already done.

With that story in mind, read this vivid, PG-13 song called *Mother Blue's*:

When I was a young man  
About 21 years old y'all  
All I wanted was a stripper girlfriend  
And a Gold Top Les Paul  
Be careful of the things you wish for  
You might get 'em  
There was a night club in Dallas  
Called Mother Blue's  
It's where Lightning Hopkins played  
And Freddy King even payed some dues  
All the dealers and gamblers  
And young white hipsters,  
they all made the scene  
The girl at the door who checked IDs  
Was just 16  
Aw, it was not a place for law biding citizens

Jackie Jones he had him a habit,  
he just couldn't stop  
Said "Give me 500 dollars  
And I'll sell you my Les Paul God Top"

- A really cool guitar

I drove my daddy's car down to Ross Avenue  
And I sold it  
I guess I should have told him  
He alluded to the police someone stole it  
It was just the first of many bad decisions  
I was to make for the next 20 years

- See. earlier conversations about confession and repentance

Oh, but I had me a guitar

Everybody knows  
That the real nightlife  
Begins after the clubs close  
What they call after hours  
It's 2 a.m. and everybody's gone  
But the band, the dealers and Jack Jones

And then the girls from the landing strip club come over  
After they put their clothes back on  
So I'm at Ma Blues and I'm sitting on an amp  
I'm playing "Twist and Shout"  
And this tall drink of water walks in  
Like she might have to shoot her way out

She come up to me and she said  
"You know anything good on that guitar?"  
I didn't say nothing, I just kept on playing  
She said, "Have you ever heard this song  
Called 'Polk Salad Annie'?" I just kept playing  
She said, "Every time I hear that song  
My insides feel like warm butter  
And I just wanna take off my clothes  
And dance around in my underwear"  
I said, "Down in Louisiana  
Where the alligator grow so mean"

That's all I knew of it and it was enough  
So we hit it off, me and this dancer  
We hit it off like a metaphor

- In a completely non-theological way, "We hit it off like a metaphor" is just a great line.

Like a metaphor for a hydrogen bomb  
We was enriched uranium, super critical mass  
We was a chain reaction, it was love and lust  
Aw, mostly lust but a mutual attraction

So there I was boys at 21 years old, I had it all  
I had a fine stripper girlfriend and a Gold Top Les Paul  
Aw, the future, it looked promising  
Oh but there were dark clouds on the horizon  
She was a beautiful girl  
But she liked to drink Tequila and that ain't all  
I come home 4 or 5 times  
And she pawned my Les Paul  
We broke up and she went to Hollywood  
She married an actor  
She got a job dancing on the Hudson Brothers TV show  
And modern lipstick from Max Factor  
I got over her, I'm glad she done alright  
I'm glad she done alright, oh yes, I am

Well now me, I never busted through the gates  
Into the big time as a rock and roll star  
For 40 years I just carried around an old Gold Top guitar  
But love and fate are mysterious things  
In this funky old world  
It was 20 years ago I ended up marrying  
That Mother Blue's door girl  
We had us a boy, he's 18 years old now,  
he's playing guitar  
He ended up with that Les Paul Gold Top, yes, he did  
Now I don't know if he's gonna hang his life on it or not  
But I'm very grateful  
for the time I get to share the stage with him  
I'm grateful for the time I get to play with musicians  
Like George Reiff and Rick Richards  
I'm grateful that I get to write these old songs  
And travel around the world and play them for people  
And they come out and hear me play  
And the days that I keep my gratitude  
Higher than my expectations  
Well, I have really good days

- “Very grateful, grateful, grateful, gratitude”

That's not really a song that I'm likely to sing to my Mom. But that line about “keeping my gratitude higher than my expectations” is a really good line.

I can read Psalms 106, 107, 118, 136, and Luke 17 & 19 and preach the heck out of that. At the end of the day – heck, at the *beginning* of the day – it's all about gratitude.

So our Lenten focus on Ray Wylie Hubbard songs and what distinguishes us as Christians includes repentance, faith, and gratitude.

And there's one more thing that ought to characterize our individual lives and our life together as Christians.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19 says

*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords,  
the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,  
who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers,  
providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were  
strangers in the land of Egypt.*

In the patriarchal society of the ancient Middle East, orphans, widows, and strangers were members of the community who did not have an adult male watching over them.

In this passage, the people of God are called to care for the ones who no one else is watching out for.

Because that's what God has done and continues to do for them.

Remember the stories from *The Real Trick* above?

Christopher turned 16 on a Chemical Dependency wing  
And on family week his momma come up and she says  
"I aint gonna stay for this whole thing  
'Cause I've got more important things to do  
than to listen to this ungrateful son."  
Chris says "If being a parent so tough  
Then how come just anybody can be one?"

Sweet Melissa she turned her first trick at seventeen  
For some backstreet passes  
and some hashish in the back of a limousine  
Now she's seen it all and she don't want to be here  
or even anywhere  
And at 22 she's got what the boys down at the VA  
call the "Thousand Yard Stare".

Those are real stories from Ray's Rehab experience about young people who have been abandoned or let down by their families and made poor choices. No one else was looking out for them.

Miss Helen Petty she lost her husband of 42 years  
Now she don't know what to do with herself  
and she just can't seem to stop the tears.  
And she can't sleep at night  
She's so afraid and so alone  
And there are these bastards  
Who take advantage of these precious souls

That's a grieving widow in danger of being taken advantage of.

So at a difficult point in his own life, as he's thinking seriously about which things matter more than other things and noticing these folks around him who are having a hard time, Ray doesn't disengage. He notices the widows, orphans, and strangers, and sings about finding "a reason to believe in spite of all this."

On the same album, *Loco Gringo's Lament*, Ray sings this song by Dallas songwriter Donny Ray Ford:

Bless the hearts of the lonely  
Give them strength and peace of mind  
Let them know that they're precious  
Send them a daily Valentine

Hold them close when they're crying  
Dry the tears from their eyes  
Teach them how to laugh again  
Let them know they've always got a friend

Some of us can't see the sunshine  
To a broken heart, it's always wintertime  
All alone and in despair  
Let's all bow our heads and say a prayer

Show them light through the darkness  
And hold their hearts through the night  
Let them feel warm and tender  
Once again before they die

Bless the hearts of the lonely  
Give them strength and peace of mind  
Let them know that they're precious  
Send them a daily Valentine

Show them light through the darkness  
And hold their hearts through the night  
Let them feel warm and tender  
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Bless the hearts of the lonely  
Bless the hearts of the lonely  
Bless the hearts of the lonely

In Matthew 25:37-40 Jesus says

*Then the righteous will answer him,  
"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food,  
or thirsty and gave you something to drink?  
And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,  
or naked and gave you clothing?  
And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"  
And the king will answer them,*

*"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

Praying that God will *Bless the Hearts of the Lonely*, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, and visiting folks who are sick or in prison are all the product of compassion – of genuine concern for others who are having a hard time. Compassion is the result of Repentance, Faith, and Gratitude

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So that's how I've spent the season of Lent – listening to Ray Wylie Hubbard songs, digging out old Bible Study notes, and thinking about what should distinguish our lives as Christians.

Easter's coming.

Repentance.

Faith.

Gratitude.

Compassion.

That's a pretty good way to get ready.

Until next time, I remain

Just Another Cowboy Preacher,

Pondering the biblical ramifications of *Snake Farm* and *Redneck Mother* (and there totally are some),

JOHN WILLIAMS

Chaplain