



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Bruce Sanguin

Luke 24: 13-25

April 6, 2008

3rd Sunday of Easter

“An Emerging Church”

The two disciples are walking home from Jerusalem after Jesus had been crucified. They are “talking about all these things that had happened” (Luke 24:13-35). The things that had happened included some really bad news, but also some potential good news. The bad news was that their hope for the future had just been snuffed out. The good news was a rumour that somehow he was still alive – an angelic looking being told this to one of the women who went to the empty tomb. A wise stranger joins them on the road and interrupts their conversation with a completely new perspective that fuels their hope.

It’s not so difficult to imagine this kind of conversation in the mainline church in the 21st century. Only today, the conversation is about declining membership, congregations needing to amalgamate to make ends meet, churches shutting their doors, and of course much reminiscence about “the good old days” when the Sunday school was full. Even clergy are getting in on this discourse of desperation. Gretta Vosper, a United Church colleague, has written a book suggesting that the only way forward is for congregations to jettison religious language about God and Christ altogether and teach the universal values of love and compassion. Christ has been crucified – nothing to do but

go home, lament our inevitable demise, or maybe recreate ourselves by becoming a church of values.

Now imagine that same holy stranger breaking into this dismal conversation in our day and age, and inquiring what it is we’re all talking about. We ask him, as did those first disciples: Are you the only one in these parts who doesn’t know what’s going on with the church? And then, he begins to offer a different perspective. I have attempted, in *The Emerging Church*, to imagine from my limited capacity, a new way of being the institution we call church from a perspective that might offer some hope. Let me be clear, these are my thoughts. I haven’t been channeling Jesus. Living in Vancouver, I thought it was important to be clear about this.

That new perspective is captured by the word “emerging” in the title of the book. What I mean by this only partly concerns the new practices that are common to congregations that are thriving – small group ministry, a dynamic hospitality team, faith formation programs that teach people different ways to pray and meditate, worship that is filled with great music and relevant preaching. Thriving congregations do these things well.

But more fundamentally, “emerging” congregations are the ones that take an evolutionary paradigm seriously. When the Being of God enters the realm of space and time – the realm of creation, this world we inhabit – it becomes evolutionary in nature. We now know that we live in an evolutionary universe. This is scientific fact. It’s how life has developed, geologically, biologically, culturally and spiritually. In humans this evolutionary thrust gave rise to the capacity for conscious self-reflection. We are not only aware. We are aware that we are aware. Because of this, we are that part of creation that is able to *consciously* participate in evolution of the universe. Evolution no longer happens *to* us. It happens *through* us. And the future belongs to those who get this at the level of their gut and their heart. The Christian faith can still talk about God and Christ, but if it is to be relevant it needs to do so from within an evolutionary understanding of the universe.

How does evolution work? It works by putting together new wholes out of disparate parts. Atoms of hydrogen and oxygen come together and from their meeting, a completely new thing emerges, something that nobody could have predicted from the inherent characteristics of those two completely different atoms. The water molecule comes into being. This is what scientists have come to call “novelty”. The philosopher A.N. Whitehead looked at the universe and described it in a single phrase. It is, he said, “an advance into novelty”.

Water transcends and yet includes hydrogen and oxygen. And through this process something new is born. Now, we don’t know what parts of the Bible the stranger opened and interpreted for those first two disciples on their way home to Emmaus, but my hunch he would have gone straight to the prophet Isaiah, who speaks on behalf of God the words: “Behold, I do a new thing! Do you not perceive it!” This describes the very nature of God – a center and a process of immense, unending, mind-boggling novelty and creativity.

The emerging church is a community of people who situate themselves in the very center of that divine creativity, continuously discerning and then cooperating with Spirit to bring forth the new thing that wants to be born through them. We’re all like hydrogen and oxygen molecules, only much more complex. We come together, and who knows what new thing Spirit will shape out of our life together. We only know this: it will be totally, wildly, magnificently unpredictable. And if the 14 billion year old universe is any guide, the more we open to this sacred evolutionary power, the more beauty and goodness and truth we will manifest together.

My favorite teaching of Jesus, within this model, is: Anyone who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God. In the book, I write:

“Religious institutions, including the church, sometimes act as though they

exist to perpetuate a particular form across generation and centuries. This is, cosmologically speaking, weird behaviour.” (27)

An emerging congregation knows that because God is always doing a new thing in an evolutionary universe, there is no point getting attached to particular forms – ways of worshiping, ways of saying the Lord’s Prayer, buildings, pews, and committee structures. The only question that matters is whether these are serving the creative intentions of the Holy One. If they aren’t, then we move on. More often than not, we move on by transcending what has come before and including what worked in the past. Tradition, in this model, consists of all the innovations of past generations that worked. So, we carry them forward – quite pragmatically because they worked then, and they continue to function well today. *Traditionalism*, on the other hand, is like putting our hand to the plow, looking back and getting stuck in the past.

So, for example, we know that anything we’ve done together as a congregation in these past 12 years is built upon the tradition – the innovations of previous generations – right from Colonel Fallis through to The Rev. Dr. Wotherspoon. The universe never recreates the wheel. It carries the form of the wheel forward as long as it’s serving its creative intentions. It does this at a biological level, through DNA, at a cultural level through value systems, and at a spiritual level through wisdom teachings and practices that stand the

test of time. But when the church moves into what I call form fetish, it’s dead. *We* might look back longingly at outdated forms and structures, but when we do the Spirit just moves on and leaves us behind.

This is what I think is happening to mainline congregations. We moved ahead in our thinking and in our theology. We’re open and inclusive and liberal and all that – sure. But we got stuck in old forms and structures and we’re still hanging on to them. Some of us would rather die than let go of them, and it’s killing congregations.

In one of the resurrection stories, the resurrected Christ tells the disciples that he is going on ahead of them to Galilee, and that he’ll meet them there. This is an apt metaphor for an emerging congregation. Christ is always going on ahead of us. Just when we think we’ve nailed him down, he’s up and calling us from a future that is in need of us to be born. Congregations that continually look back to first century to find Christ are looking in the wrong place. Always, always, always, he’s gone ahead of us, calling us from the future. Do you think those first disciples kept going back to the tomb after they realized it was empty? Christ was already back at headquarters in the Galilee with their next assignment. We look back every Sunday at the old stories, of course. But we look through them into the future. They are *icons* meant to reveal Christ in our day and age, not idols that we worship.

The emerging congregation understands that truth itself evolves. There is an ultimate, Absolute Truth, yes. But as soon as this Absolute enters into time and space, it becomes a developing, evolving, reality. A Mennonite friend of mine was concerned with my soul, because he knew I was with the United Church of Canada – we didn't take the Bible literally, we welcomed homosexuals, etc. So, he finally asked me the question: Bruce, do you know Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour?

Well, the only answer to this question in an emerging church is: Which Christ are you talking about? One of the chapters in the book is called What Colour is Your Christ. I based this on the brilliant work of Dr. Don Beck in his theory of Spiral Dynamics. Based on the work of Dr. Clare Graves, he colour-coded entire value-systems, or worldviews that humans create and then evolve through: Tribal, Warrior, Traditional, Modern/Scientific; Postmodern/Pluralistic; Integral and beyond. It was Ken Wilber who helped me to see that for Christians, the nature of the Christ we are in relationship with is totally different depending on our worldview. There is a Red, Blue, Green, Yellow and Turquoise Christ. And when Blues and Greens are talking about Christ, they are talking about different Christ's. It's not until you get to Yellow, that you don't feel threatened by the other Christ's and you can have meaningful conversations.

“The Christ who is cosmic in scope and the presence of universal wisdom will always serve the image we have constructed for him. Therefore, we must never freeze the image of Christ into one timeless form. With Christ, there is no place to rest our head and no worldview that will not eventually be transcended by a more comprehensive one.” (102)

The emerging church interprets Christ's life and death and resurrection as a creative process, not a redemptive event. His whole life and even the manner of his death was one magnificent act of creation, ushering all of humanity forward as part of the evolutionary thrust of the universe. We too, in our age, are called to take what the Christ began and move it forward. An emerging congregation is committed to this kind of holy evolution.

I open the book by sharing a dream that came to Joanne Hausch when we were preparing for a capital campaign, 11 years ago. Some of you may remember the dream. Here's how I tell it in my book:

“People are standing around a very large, grey stone building admiring its size and physical beauty. They are going on and on about how great it looks. In the dream, Joanne is surprised by their fascination with its exterior characteristics. Yes, the rock is beautiful she agrees. But the real beauty, she tries desperately to explain to the crowd, is radiating from within the rock. A radiant, palpable energy was apparent to her, but not to the

gathering. The stone was alive, from this inside out.” (p. 17).

when we get too gloomy. Christ is risen! Hallelujah.

You see, that’s the emerging church. Many admire the beauty of this grey stone building we’re in this morning, and rightly so. The stained glass windows are among the best stained glass in Canada. But when the living Christ gets in on the conversation, he tells us, as he was telling Joanne, that this exterior beauty pales in comparison to the vitality and creativity that is alive within each of you. The emerging church depends upon each of us being lit up from the inside-out by the living presence of the Christ. The church is made up of your collective radiant presence. As each of you grows in your felt sense that the living Christ is calling you to evolve, to grow, to emerge into ever more radiant centers of compassion, consciousness, and beauty, then this building will really shine. It will become like a neon sign to Vancouver and beyond that the living Christ is alive and well, because it will be lit up from that place inside each of us where God is alive.

I’m not gloomy about the future of the emerging church. Far from it. This is an exciting time. God is always doing a new thing. I have witnessed this happening, through you, in these past 12 years. This book is about you, and truly it’s *for* all you who have with so much dedication and creativity, given of yourselves. I am truly grateful to have made this leg of the journey with all of you, and look forward to the next leg. I believe that the holy stranger continues to break into our conversation about the church