



## “Evolutionary Christian Spirituality – Part 1”

As a congregation we have been through three separate Imagine Canadian Memorial retreats in the past couple of months. As well, we have asked the whole congregation to contribute their dreams for our community by responding to a questionnaire. The results of this conversation were carefully documented, circulated via email and placed on our website. The Board has asked me to complete this process of imagining what Canadian Memorial can become in the next 5-10 years by planning an *Imagine Campaign* for the fall, 2009. You will be hearing more about this in the weeks and months to come.

Central to our imagining together is re-visioning our Purpose, Values and Vision statement. A draft copy of this document is now available on our website. The new Purpose statement, which has been endorsed by the Board and will be presented to the congregation in June for approval, acts as a steering wheel for our new vision. The working Purpose, as it now stands – and still subject to final tweaks – reads:

*We are called by God to be an open hearted, open minded community of faith, teaching and practicing evolutionary Christianity.*

What does this mean? I am going to introduce the meaning of “evolutionary Christianity” this morning and then in subsequent sermons explore its meaning for the life and practice of Canadian Memorial.

### *Nothing Has Been Lost*

The first thing to say about this is that nothing that is central to our identity has been lost. Rather, everything that is central to our previous Mission, Vision, and Value statement is carried forward. I hope that you will see that it is not only included, but also transcended. This principle of “transcend and include” is central to evolutionary science and spirituality and we will talk about it more in this series. To be as clear as possible about this: we are Christ-centered; Spirit gifts us for ministry; and we are in covenant with the God of our ancestors.

As well, rest assured: the foundational spiritual principles that have animated our culture at Canadian Memorial continue to be foundational: *Biblical literacy* – we take the Bible seriously, not literally; *gift-based ministry* – our service to the church and beyond is grounded in the gifts of Spirit, so that people can serve from a place of joy and passion, not obligation; *ministry*

*anywhere, anytime, by anybody* – each of us is called to be ministers and my role is to help you fulfill your calling, not to do ministry on your behalf; *out of meetings and into ministry* – we reduce bureaucracy to a bare, but highly effective, minimum so that our governance system is focused on fulfilling our vision.

### **The Challenge**

Our Christian identity is secure. But here's the challenge: we know that there are different expressions of Christian identity out there and for this diversity we are grateful. Diversity is a central dynamic of an evolutionary perspective. So we are naturally excited to let the public know what is distinctive and unique about our identity. Some distinguishing characteristics of our congregation include: We think that the Bible was written by men and women reflecting the worldviews and assumptions of their historical period – and not by God. As I mentioned, we take it seriously, but not literally. We also want the public to know that sexual orientation is not an issue for us. We think that God cares about loving sexuality between two consenting adults and not their gender. As citizens of modern culture, we affirm the scientific method and take the findings of science seriously. The scientific method is not in conflict with a healthy Christian spirituality. Another thing we want the public to know about us, is that we don't think faith is about believing all the right things as the ticket to heaven. We think it's more about how we engage with questions

of ultimate concern and how we live those questions out in our lives. Finally, God doesn't play favorites when it comes to religion, but rather reveals Herself/Himself through a variety of religious traditions and through creation itself.

North American churches that share this concern to convey a distinctive identity have tried various identity "labels". We tried "liberal". But liberal carried connotations of moral and ethical relativism. You do your thing. I do mine. It's all Ok. Then it was "progressive". And there is a growing movement of "progressive Christian congregations" in both Canada and the U.S., each with their own national association. We tried this on at Canadian Memorial, but the feedback I received from many was that it set up an "us/them" dynamic that wasn't healthy. "Progressive" implies that *they* are regressive. Then Marcus Borg came out with a non-judgmental distinction between what he called "*earlier*" paradigm churches and "*emerging*" paradigm churches. Essentially, emerging is essentially "progressive" by another, less divisive name.

My book, *The Emerging Church*, uses the same word as Borg, but means something quite different by it. It is descriptive, without being judgmental. By "emerging", I am referring to a scientifically verified principle of life – emergence. This meaning of emergence come from evolutionary science, (in particular biochemistry) describing the tendency of two separate parts to form a whole, and the

whole that forms is not just greater than the sum of the two parts. It is *novel* in ways that could never have been predicted by the characteristics of the two separate parts. Hydrogen molecules and oxygen molecules find each other and their communion results in water – an element that no Nobel Laureate scientist could have predicted. This novelty is a great mystery, which science can only measure and describe – and be amazed by. Life is winding itself up in the direction of increased complexity and consciousness. Furthermore, this emergent dynamic is not limited to the biological realm. It is operative at the level of geology, biology, culture, community, consciousness and spirit. It is a fundamental dynamic of the universe. Dirt got up and started writing Shakespeare – to use Ken Wilber’s phrase.

Whereas it is not the role of science to make conjecture as to the meaning and origins of this emergent dynamic, it is most certainly the domain of theology. I am persuaded that emergence is both animated by Spirit and a manifestation of Spirit in the realm of space and time. I am further persuaded that the church – even the “liberal” church has been slow to grasp and integrate the implications of the evolutionary reality of our universe at a theological and a practical level of spiritual practice. There is good reason for this which I will go into in more depth in a subsequent sermon.

Now just to complicate matters even more, there is a branch of the

evangelical church in North America that calls itself the “emergent church” movement. What they mean by this term is way different from both Borg and Sanguin. Yikes! The emergent church movement consists of evangelical Christians who are trying to be more open and less dogmatic than your average evangelical church. But they don’t want to be confused with liberal Christians – because those liberals are still too wishy-washy for them!

So why didn’t I call my book “*The Evolutionary Church*”? Well, the short answer is that it wasn’t my choice. My book was my publisher’s follow-up to a bestseller they published called *Emerging Christianity*. They hoped to be able to ride on the coattails of the success of that book, and possibly even get some traction in the emergent evangelical movement. And to some extent that is working. I get emails from youth pastors in conservative congregation in Texas, who are intrigued and want to know more. My preference would actually have been to call it *The Evolutionary Church*.

So, there’s a little background about the struggle for churches to find ways to signal to the public their unique sense of divine calling – from liberal to progressive to emergent to evolutionary. As far as I am aware, we would be the first congregation in North America to identify ourselves as espousing, teaching, and practicing evolutionary Christianity. That’s not, in itself, a motivating factor, however.

***What Is Evolutionary Spirituality?***

What do we mean by “evolutionary Christian spirituality”? Get your pens out. Turn on the recording devices. It means that God works through evolution – not evolution as the materialistic dynamic of neo-Darwinism, but evolution as the non-coercive unfolding of Spirit in space and time. At the human level of evolution, it means that we grow. We are graced by the intelligence and consciousness of all that has gone before us. We are concentrated amalgams of 14 billion years of evolution, and God hopes that through us there is some added value. We are a part of the evolutionary process that is able to consciously participate in our own evolution. Darwinian natural selection has become “actual” selection – we are capable of selecting our preferred future. Spirit – in the created realm – has evolved to the point, in us, of being able to cooperate with the evolutionary impulse to increase in complexity and consciousness. We do this through conscious consent. We say “yes” to God and the angels, as did Mary when she was called to give birth to the Christ.

To use the metaphor in the reading from John’s gospel today – which compares Christ to the vine and us to the branches – to abide in Christ is to grow and to bear fruit. Notice how the reading is implicitly evolutionary. That which is not connected to the vine and therefore not bearing fruit, is pruned away. Don’t think of this as God’s wrathful judgment, but rather as an evolutionary

truth. In evolutionary development, the divine Spirit prunes away all in us that is not adding value and contributing to growth. (I think a minor mistake may have been made with mosquitoes – but who am I to judge!)

How is this different from traditional theological models? Well, it’s different in very many ways. But one fundamental way is that the work of God is never finished. In traditional theology, God came in Jesus to save us from sin 2000 years ago, those who believe it are saved, and the rest of history is mostly a matter of faithfully waiting and witnessing to that truth until God comes again to shut it down. In evolutionary spirituality, Jesus was a starting point, not the end point. He showed us the path of conscious consent. The Christ consciousness that infused and informed him, may also infuse and inform us, and do so in unique ways.

The church, in this evolutionary model, consists of those people who feel called to be a transforming presence in the world – to influence the unfolding of history in accordance with God’s dream of reality: a more inclusive, compassionate and just world order. But in order to do this, the members of the church consciously participate in their evolution of their own consciousness and spirit. The goal is not merely to ask ourselves: “What would Jesus do”? And then try to do what Jesus did. The goal is to open ourselves to the divine mind that was in Jesus of Nazareth, what the author of John’s gospel calls The Word or the *Logos*. The future that

we then help to bring forth is a manifestation of the Mind of God working in our particular age, and through our particular form of consciousness – both individual and collective. We are called, not merely to believe in Jesus, but to experience the mind of God that was in Jesus for ourselves, and then imagine and co-create a future for ourselves and for our world that is in alignment with that experience. The evolutionary Christian looks in both directions from the vantage point of the present. We look to the past, to honour our lineage and the collective wisdom of our people. But we hear the voice of those people admonishing us to co-create the future.

It is a tenet of evolutionary spirituality that the future is indeterminate. Of course, there is a certain historical momentum and trajectory. But all of that history and that entire trajectory are located in each one of us in the present. All of this 14 billion years of evolutionary history is gathered up in you in the present. You are the sum total of all that has gone before – that includes your human ancestry and lineage, but it also includes the fish, the birds, the mammals and plants, the soil, pretty much everything. The poet Walt Whitman caught the immensity of this truth in a single line: “I am large. I contain multitudes”. Of course, our indigenous people never lost this understanding.

But you are not only the past. Grounded in the past, yet you are a center of evolutionary emergence as well. The future is coming through you. To awaken to this creative potential, individually and collectively, is a central part of what it means to be disciples of Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are not passively waiting around for God to do something. God is waiting for us to co-create the future.

In the next few sermons I will expand upon the distinctive meaning of evolutionary Christianity. For now, I leave you with an image. Think of those Russian nesting dolls. There are dolls inside of dolls inside of dolls. This nesting occurs all the way up and all the way down in an evolutionary universe. Progressive Christianity is nested – in my opinion – within evolutionary Christianity. It’s not lost, it’s nested. Evolutionary Christianity transcends (it’s more comprehensive), yet includes all the features of progressive Christianity. Spirit is the largest doll you can imagine – everything is contained within Spirit. Spirit is also the very wood out of which all the nesting dolls are made and is the consciousness that intends all the dolls of every size and shape into being. It is the nature of this spirit-infused universe that evolutionary Christianity will also be nested – transcended, yet included – in a more comprehensive expression of divine mystery. God is never finished with us.