



“Evolutionary Christian Spirituality – Part 4”

Before my sermon series on evolutionary Christian spirituality was so rudely interrupted by a two-week vacation in Europe, we were drilling down to see if we couldn't come to some kind of preliminary understanding of what is meant by our proposed new Purpose statement:

We are called by God to be an open hearted, open-mind community, teaching and practicing evolutionary Christian spirituality.

I say “preliminary” because it is the nature of evolutionary spirituality that all attempts at articulation will be partial. It is a built-in feature of this model that all attempts to define what we mean by the term are themselves evolving. So perhaps you can appreciate already how different this is from the way theology and church has been imagined in the past. In this model, you begin with an awareness that everything you discover about truth and your way of being the church today is going to be – at best – a foundation for ever-more nuanced and complex expressions. In some cases, what you thought was essential will actually need to be left behind. And this leaving behind will be understood as an act of faithful discernment.

Take Paul's letter to the community at Corinth as an example. Paul was all about discerning what

needed to be left behind of his religion and what he intended to carry forward – and this discernment extended to his own name! Paul, of course, was Saul before he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Saul was a really, really smart rabbi who didn't appreciate upstart peasant rabbis like Jesus of Nazareth upsetting the theological apple cart with his new-fangled teaching. So, when the religious authorities needed a volunteer to round up the followers of this new spirituality and put an end to the fledgling movement, Saul volunteered.

So shattered was Saul by his encounter with the risen Jesus that by the time a couple of disciples picked him up off the road to Damascus and dusted him off, he had undergone a shift in identity. He needed a new name. He became, to use his own phrase, “a new creation in Christ” (2 Corinthians 17). Saul became Paul.

Because Saul was really, really smart he did an interesting thing with all the teachings about Jesus that he received from the other apostles. He never, ever talked about them in any of his letters. It's not that he didn't know the parables of Jesus. It's that somebody else was doing Jesus' teachings. It was in hand. But he had a distinctive contribution to make. He would take the teachings *of* Jesus and

transform them into teachings *about* Jesus. Just as Paul's name evolved, so Paul's calling was to take this movement to a new level. This is what he's getting at when he writes:

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer that way” (5:16).

In other words Jesus body is barely cold, the disciples are just trying to figure out how to pass on Jesus' teachings to the world – an important, even crucial element to ensure the survival of the movement – and Paul is saying “yeah, but you know what, Peter and James and John, you're missing a piece by focusing exclusively on Jesus' teachings...let's start thinking about his *transpersonal* identity.” Let's start thinking about the cosmic dimensions of what God was doing in Jesus. Without going into any detail at this point, Paul started thinking about Jesus as the embodiment of sacred wisdom – Sophia. He started imagining that God was reconciling all of creation to Godself in and through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Paul began to think that a new age had been ushered in. A “new creation” had begun, and if you wanted proof, you need look no further than his own transformed life.

Here's the point I'm trying to make. Very early in his life as a follower of Christ, Paul is already an active agent in the evolution of the Jesus tradition. I want to suggest that Paul's process is Spirit-led, and

therefore one which the church is called to re-enact in every generation. The apostles in Jerusalem really didn't know what to do with Paul. He was pushing them to the edge of their identity as Jews. He was crossing boundaries, perhaps even transgressing boundaries: for example, the Gentiles were welcome, they didn't have to eat kosher food or being circumcised; they didn't have to observe Jewish rituals. For Paul, God had done something radically new in Jesus of Nazareth, and the disciples weren't getting it.

Paul writes: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (5:17)

So, when we're talking about evolutionary spirituality we're talking about organizing around that principle. We're saying that that same thing that was happening in Paul still happens today. We're still called to make meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in new and surprising ways – ways that make sense in light of the postmodern context of our days. Just as Paul was active in helping as an evolutionary agent of the early Christian movement, so we are called to open to the evolutionary promptings of Spirit. For instance, we now live in a scientific age and it would be crazy not to adjust our theology, our spiritual practice, and our way of being church in a way that incorporated the scientific lens on reality. Nothing is frozen in time. No meaning is every final. No configuration of “church” is the final representation. The future of

Christianity is open, fluid, in conversation with the past of course, and yet focused ultimately on the new creation.

Jesus tells a story about a seed – one of his favorite images. He says that the Kingdom of God is like a seed that a farmer scatters. After a few sleeps, the farmer gets up one day, and sure enough, the seeds have sprouted. But the farmer doesn't have a clue how it happened. He just knows that it's going to put food on the table for his family. Now, if you are a subsistence farmer, you're likely to give this whole mystery passing consideration. You've got work to do. You don't have a lot of time to ponder the mystery of growth. But if you are a follower of Jesus, he's going to plop you down in front of a wheat field and require that you consider it deeply. Because, if you get this piece, you get the Kingdom of God, and if you get the Kingdom of God from the inside out, you get what Jesus is on about.

Jesus invited his followers to look at the mystery of growth – to suspend, ordinary functional consciousness (well, seeds just grow and then we harvest the seed and make bread and eat it, so that's a good thing) and look at the process, the dynamics of growth. "The earth", says Jesus, "produces of itself". To me, that's the key line in the whole parable. The earth knows how to do life. The universe itself knows how to do life. It comes, as I've said before, as standard equipment in creation. Life emerges. Scientists have names for it – self-organization, autopoiesis, emergence –

but these are just substitutes for a word that describes the religious sensibility that anybody who has spent anytime at all pondering the meaning of life feels – Mystery. And mystery is not the sum total of what we do not know, but which we might know one day when science gets around to figuring it out. This is not a detective novel and it's not something that will ever be "solved". Mystery is about entering into the interior depths of reality and there being apprehended by the One, the Oneness, the Source of all this life, the Spirit from Whom all creation emerges. The religious life is about falling back in love with life, with the Mystery of all it all, with the One in whom this life emerges, and then behaving as though you are in love.

Notice the implicit evolutionary awareness in the way the parable is told – first the seed, then the sprout, then the stalk, then the flower, then the harvesting. It's obvious, in one sense, that there is developmental growth. But I believe Jesus was attempting to get his disciples to be aware that this developmental growth happens in them as well. The same Spirit, from which the seed grows into a fully mature plant, is animating them, growing them, awakening them to their full potential. In fact, if you spend much time pondering the mystery of evolutionary development, you come to a mystical awareness that *we* are the seeds, and that the same mysterious power that we observe animating a plant also animates our growth. We're meant to come to full flower – before the end of our life all that we have

done, all that we have been, all that we have contributed will be harvested to serve the ongoing evolutionary journey of the cosmos.

But stay with me a little longer, if you will. Let's go deeper into the soil of Mystery here. If the earth as a medium produces of itself, then the same must be true for us. After all, we are the presence of the earth in human form – what else can we be? Give the earth 5 billion years, and leave it to “produce of itself” and the planet produces human beings, with bodies and minds, with flesh and spirit, with instinct and conscious awareness. We are the earth in human form, are we not? Then it can be said as scientific fact as well as spiritual mystery that as the presence of the earth in human form, we also “produce of ourselves”. We are each of us a medium of sacred mystery. We produce of ourselves. And this surely describes the history of the human species. From the start we have been creating new modes of human presence, new and more complex levels of consciousness have emerged, new forms of governing ourselves, new technologies. Not always for the best – not always in accordance with sacred wisdom. We are centres of creative emergence. We are the earth, we are the seeds, we are manifestations of Spirit. This evolutionary sacred intelligence is coursing through you and through me. And when we open to this intelligence, we may actually become one with it. To be a new creation in Christ is to harness our creative energies in such a way that all of life is able to thrive – not just us.

When we were in Florence we went the Musee Academe where Michael Angelo's David is on display. I can only imagine that when he was doing his work, he became one with the creative intelligence of the universe. It's an astonishing feat of creativity. But the sculptures that had an even greater impact on us, I think, were his prisoners. These are statues of human figures that he didn't finish. They're trapped in the marble. So, it appears as though they are still imprisoned in the stone, and struggling to be free and whole. To us, it described the human journey to be released into our fullness and our freedom of being. The difference between those imprisoned marble figures and us, however, is that we can consciously cooperate in our own release. We can chip away at whatever it is that confines us. It's a lifelong project. And if we get free enough ourselves, we can even dedicate ourselves to helping others to gain their freedom. With Don Beck, I would call this creative project of growing into fullness and freedom, a prime directive of the universe. It's another built-in feature of the universe – a God-force if you like. Our egos didn't generate it. It's what is behind the mystery of growth and evolution. It is the call of the Christ.

By declaring that we intend to “teach and practice evolutionary Christian spirituality” we are saying that we are willing as a community to enter what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, and allow ourselves to explore as fully as possible of the mystery of

growth: that we are seeds of God; that we *are* the earth that produces of itself; that we are farmers who reap this harvest, and finally, when you get to the bottom of it all, we are embodied forms of the mystery of a sacred evolutionary impulse. All of this is what it means to be in Christ – the old has passed away and everything has become new!

What will this mean for Canadian Memorial? Honestly, I'm not 100% sure. But I do know that when we commit to God that we will be the earth for God's seed, growth will happen. I do know that we will strive not to engineer our future into existence, but rather trust this emergent impulse. We won't try to be clever and force life into existence – no need. Rather, we'll create habitats for growth – in our worship, our educational programs, our way of being together in community and in the way we govern ourselves. We will embrace as much as possible a natural design. We won't "know" how the growth happens – anymore than a

farmer knows how the seed grows – but we will know it's a sign of God in our midst. We will continue to help people discover their gifts for ministry and then release them into their calling, and the garden that emerges we will call "church". It will be more like an English garden, I suspect, than a French one – a "chaordic" flourishing. (Chaordic is a merging of the words chaos and order). We will tend this garden, as all gardens must be tended in order to flourish, and there will be those who love to dead-head and prune, and those who love to pick and make beautiful arrangements; there will be those who haul in the manure, and those who are always dreaming up garden beds.

We will tap into an evolutionary intelligence that is in the ascendant right now on our planet, that we call Sophia or sacred wisdom, and who was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. And this much we know: it will continue to be a great adventure of discovery of the Christ who makes all things new.