

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
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“The Emerging Church”

Rev. William G. Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

Next month, the Beloit College Mindset list will turn 20 years old. Began in 1998 each August the list provides a look at the cultural touchstones that shape the lives of students about to enter college.

Last year’s list tells us, “entering college students have always had eBay and iMacs, India and Pakistan have always had the bomb. The Sopranos and SpongeBob SquarePants have always been part of popular culture, Wayne Gretzky and John Elway have always been retired.” Of course the list goes on from there. The introduction states “these students are faced with the prospect of student loan debt, and of robots and foreigners taking their jobs which all makes them feel anxious and weak.”

The mindset list reminds us that part of how we respond to the reality of life is shaped by the world in which we grew up. Some generations have grown up in a world of hopeful abundance; others have entered a world which seems to offer limited options for them. What we know is the world is changing. And these changes affect all sorts of trends and traditions within families, communities, and of course, the church.

Rev. Dr. Paula Northwood writes, “Last year marked the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, a Catholic priest named Martin Luther concerned about problems within the church nailed 95 ideas for discussion on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany intending to foster conversation about ways to improve the church he loved.

It did not go well. Instead of bringing about internal change, Luther was excommunicated; and instead his actions and ideas, and those of other reformers, resulted in new branches of Christianity called Protestants.

The Reformation did not happen in a day. Those 95 thesis were part of a larger movement of change not only in the church, but also societally, and intellectually. It was a time much like today including the decline of church attendance and membership. Renowned Author and Religion Professor Phyllis Tickle who died in 2015, left a profound body of writing to help the church ponder, “Are we coming to another Reformation?”

In Professor Tickle’s book *The Great Emergence*, she used the analogy of the “The 500-Year Rummage Sale” to describe religious change over the years. Tickle said “historically the church ‘cleans house’ roughly every 500 years,” holding what she calls a “giant rummage sale,” deciding what to dispose and what to keep. Let’s take a quick glance at the history to which the Professor is referring.

Looking back the time of Christ was the first rummage sale, an era Tickle calls “The Great Transformation,” when a man who was “Emmanuel, God With Us” created a new

understanding of our relationship with God. Five hundred years later saw the collapse of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Dark Ages. In this period, the church entered an era of preservation going underground with monks and nuns practicing the monastic tradition in abbeys, convents, and priories.

In 1054, came “The Great Schism,” when the Christian Church split into the Eastern and Western branches we see today represented by the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Then in the 1500s, “The Reformation” resulted in new branches of Christian tradition, with different understandings of how people relate to God and individual interpretation of the bible. In other words, every 500 years or so Tickle says, there have been tectonic shifts in the Christian tradition, resulting in huge changes in understanding and practice.

We listen to Mark’s story today, and we see two major themes. One theme is God’s abundance. You will notice that the reading today skips over a lot of verses, that’s because the lectionary has touched on those stories at other times during the year. But what we have are stories of God’s relentless abundance. One is about feeding more than 5000 people with very little food. The second tells of a time the disciples were caught in a storm and Jesus comes walking across the water to save them. And of course today’s story of healings. Every step of the way as God’s people encountered fear, scarcity, or loss... Jesus offered God’s overwhelming abundance.

So, is the church entering the time for its next rummage sale? Let’s look at the evidence? It’s easy to identify the changes of the last 500 years. Our understanding of science has progressed exponentially, pushing us to reconcile scientific and religious thought. We are culturally more diverse. We are living longer. Family units take a variety of forms. We are a global community, no longer confined to the boundaries of our physical neighborhoods. We have access to facts, data, opinions, and information instantly through computers we keep in our pockets or purses. Communication and access to news is immediate and unfiltered. How could these developments not alter how we understand who we are, why we exist, and where God is in our lives?

We remember a time when church attendance was weekly and it grew from a person’s sense of duty and obligation. We remember widespread cultural support for the church when stores were closed on Sundays and leaders like Benjamin Franklin and others through the ages urged people to go to church because they felt church attendance made better citizens. Today, we are keenly aware how this cultural support for the church has withered.

Professor Tickle writes, that the new era of what many call “The Emerging Church,” will be a religious movement that crosses denominational boundaries, seeks common ground, engages diverse cultures, embraces social causes as ways to live out Christ’s call to serve others, and it will take place largely outside of church buildings. If this is the church of the future, how do we respond?

I admit to you that for most of my pastoral career I have avoided, and in fact despised sermons like this and the books and articles from which they came. First, they always left a deep pit of hopelessness about the church's future in my stomach; secondly, they seemed to be a platform for authors to complain about the church and tell the church it had to change the way they wanted it to change. For me, there is much about the church that I love, it's traditions, it's music, it's Spirit and more. But mostly these resources would upset me because they never provided answers; they never gave any help in understanding how the church might examine its way of being in the world.

Finally, after years of hearing about this rummage sale, something exciting and a little scary seems to be emerging. The picture taking shape is easily drawn from our bible story today where we see Jesus crossing boundaries nationally, socially, culturally, religiously, and economically; and, we see him offering the abundance of God everywhere he goes.

This new paradigm for the church does not call us to throw out all our traditions. It does call us to continue to do something the church has generally been very good at -- be in dialogue with our neighbors outside the church and ask, "What do you need to feel whole, to be happy, to lead fulfilling lives, to make a difference in the world, to feel like you belong and have a place to call your own?"

Then secondly, and this is the slightly intimidating part for some of us, the emerging picture of the church suggests we need to be in dialogue with those same neighbors, friends, people sitting by us at dance lessons, or soccer games, and ask them, "how might the church help you live this more abundant life?"

These sorts of dialogues may look different in different churches. One church may ponder a panel of local citizens to give feedback. Another may consider a citizen's action board to suggest to church leadership ideas that might best serve the community with the resources God has given to the church. Another church may invite a few interested non-members to sit on committees or boards as participants. Another church may invite its congregation to have conversations like these with the people they encounter as they go throughout their week.

But the tectonic shift in the church seems to be this call to be in dialogue with anyone and everyone willing to talk to us. This is being identified as the path of new life. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus calls this the Kingdom of God. In John's gospel our savior often simply calls it, "abundant life." No matter what we call it, we all sense something more is out there for us, and we'd all desperately like some help in living into the kingdom of abundance which Jesus embodies.

As we enter into this new paradigm, mistakes may be made, some of our questions will be rejected, but we do so with the assurance we are loved and forgiven, and we do so supported by foundational promises of faith, resurrection and renewal. Together let's look for ways to live into this paradigm trusting fully that God is with us through each experiment, each failure and many successes.

Amen