

The Church Must Die or Die

From the series: Moving On To Maturity

Text: Ezekiel 37:14; John 12:24, 43; 13:5

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

On Thursday, the *Grand Haven Tribune* called my secretary, Jane, and asked if she had made a mistake in the newspaper ad. Jane asked, "Why?", and they said, "Well, the sermon title is listed as, 'The Church Must Die or Die,'" and Jane said, "No, unfortunately, that's what he means."

I think, upon a little reflection, you might understand what I mean. The Church must die to itself, its institutional forms, its prestige, its power, its self-aggrandizing tendency - must die to all of that, or it will die because it will fail to fulfill the purpose that God has for the Church.

The death and resurrection image is a very common New Testament image. Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live." In the 6th chapter of Romans, he talks about being buried with Christ in baptism in order that he might be raised again to newness of life. Dying to self, rising to new life in the Spirit of God is a very central image, the idea that we do come to the end of our self, our self project, our self-centeredness, dying to that, we become open to that which would open us to the eternal, to God, to the sacred, to the Holy.

While I know that the references in the New Testament are personal references, I don't think I'm stretching it too far to apply that to the community, the body of Christ, in our case, to the Church. It is true, just as an individual has to come to the end of self in order to be filled with that which is beyond, so the Church needs not just once, but again and again, to die to its forms and its structures and its formulations and rules and regulations and *modus operandi* in order that it might experience the freshness and newness that the Spirit would continue to create. I want to say that this morning. I was intending to deal with that in the fourth of my presentations on Tuesday night about "How My Mind Has Changed," but I never got to that one, so I'm going to take it up this morning, nonetheless, because I do believe it is so critical to our experience, our experience of being Christian, our religious life, our spiritual life. It is so important that we understand that our diverse religious experience and expression is the

consequence of the fact that it is a human response, that religion is a human phenomenon.

My mind has changed about that because I grew up, was nurtured and trained and began my ministry thinking quite differently about religion. In the first place, I thought there was only one true religion and I had it. But, more than that, I thought religion was dictated from God, that it was divinely arranged, and that it was incumbent upon us to determine, to discern that which was true and absolute because religion was the product of divine revelation, rather than recognizing that the vast diversity of human religion is the consequence of the fact that religion is human response to that initiative from beyond, that sense of the holy or the sacred. It is our human response to the encounter with God in the mystery of our existence. Those questions that obtrude themselves upon us, particularly at those critical moments of life, draw from us questions and lead us on a quest, a quest for that ultimate mystery that defies our attempts to neatly package and domesticate it. Human religion is response to the Ultimate Mystery, and the diversity of religious forms and shapes and creeds and practices reflect the diversity of humankind and the diversity of human experience, and it is not as though my response is right and true and yours somewhat questionable, but rather, that being different people with different experiences, we respond out of the depths of our being with a wonderful diversity that marks human religion.

That makes a huge difference in how we understand the pursuit of our own spiritual life and how we relate to others individually and institutionally. The institutional Church is a necessity. No movement of the Spirit can ever perpetuate itself without institutional forms. But, the very moment that the institutional forms take shape, the seeds of death lie in the movement of the Spirit. That's just the way it is. I don't know how it could be any different than that. But, at least the awareness of that can alert us to the danger of absolutizing the respective religious forms which cover the face of the earth.

The Church hasn't taught us that, by and large, for we have claimed divinely grounded revelation and divinely shaped institutional forms, creedal forms, liturgical forms, the way the Church is organized and structured. And the Church has taught us that kind of absolutizing. It was in July of 1049 or so that the delegates from the Pope in Rome went to Constantinople and stood before the altar at St. Sophia and excommunicated the Patriarch who was the head of the Eastern Orthodox wing of the Church. Within a few days, the Patriarch in Constantinople returned the favor, and we had the first major schism within the Church. Then it was the western Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic, the Latin right and the Eastern Orthodox right. And then, of course, in the 16th century the catalyst, Martin Luther, but other reformers besides, led that movement that we call the Reformation of the Church and once again we could get language many places about how they mutually excommunicated each other. With the advent of Protestantism out of the 16th century, the Church continued to splinter and it

splinters still, and I do believe that the problem is that we fail to recognize the human dimension of our religious experience.

I know there is something endemic in all of us that really wants to have the truth, the last word, absolute security. There is something human in us that wants our way, our truth, our institution, our society to be infallible and inerrant and absolutely trustworthy. As a matter of fact, in the human scene, that doesn't happen. And, as a matter of fact, if we demand that that happens or have the illusion that ours is "it," we'll be in a situation of constant conflict and mutual excommunication, and the whole scene will be what it has been over nearly 2000 years. Church history is not a pretty story, and I really think at the core is that inclination to absolutize my vision, my view, my form, justifying it on the basis that it is divine rather than simply recognizing that there is this tremendous diversity of religious expression which points to the universality of the religious quest, the question deep within, and all of that diversity reflecting the diversity of humankind and human experience that forms that response in all of the respective ways that we find. I think it's a very crucial insight to see that our religious expression is a human, creative, imaginative construct. It is not sacred, it is not holy, it is not inerrant or infallible, and it didn't come from God. It is because God has come to us, but the varieties of religious experience are reflected in the varieties of religious institutions, forms, and structures, and if we could just get there, religion could become a part of the world's solutions rather than the volatile fuel to continue to be part of the world's problems.

This, I think, is what was going on with Jesus. That's why I read these selected passages. His movement creates a stir. There's life; there's passion; the people hear him gladly; his words resonate with something deep within them, and in that climactic sign that makes them call a Council, they say, "What are we going to do?" and Caiaphas, spokesperson for the established Church, with a bit of cynicism which is peril for those of us who are in this thing professionally, says, "Look, don't be silly. With one man gone, everything stays intact. Simple." Let me say a word for Caiaphas. There are authorities, leaders within the institution, necessarily so, and there are concerns for the well-being of the institution, for its faithful perpetuation and its fruitful life. But, the danger is, and we can see it here, that that fresh voice will be stifled and that movement be killed.

Jesus comes into the city, they hail him, and the cry is, "Look, we can't do anything. The whole world's going after him." The Greeks want to see him and that triggers with Jesus the realization of where he is on the calendar of his life. The hour has come, and now it's his struggle. Will I be true? Will I be true to that newness that I see and embody? Or, will I buckle and allow the old to go on undisturbed? A grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies, yet bears fruit. The one who grasps unto his life loses it. The one willing to give his life away gains life eternal, life in a whole other dimension. And John sums up the end of that first half of the Gospel by saying, "In spite of everything they saw, they didn't listen." Even some of the leaders knew it. Even some of the leaders believed. But, for fear

of being put out of the synagogue, loving human glory more than the glory of God, they didn't join the movement and Jesus was executed. It is a paradigm, a picture, a model of what has happened over and over again. Because we identify our forms, our structures, no matter how loved they may be, no matter how precious they may be, we tend to make them gods which we just happen to possess rather than our poor stumbling, stammering attempts to respond to the one who has encountered us.

In a recent issue of *Christianity Today*, the conservative journal, there were some 130 signatures to a declaration of doctrinal definition straight out of the 16th century, the evangelical, fundamentalist group who signed that document declaring once again what has been declared right down the line. And in the journal of more liberal Christianity, the editorial in *The Christian Century*, after discussing that declaration from the fundamental group, says the believers with such questions about the atonement or about evangelical landmarks such as the infallibility of scripture and the lost state of non-Christians will not find their questions addressed or acknowledged by the document, either on biblical or theological grounds. They will only find the old claims reasserted. Such a summary of doctrinal claims can be a rather empty gesture, if not accompanied by a deep engagement with the real questions that are on people's minds.

I find it very interesting that, in a time when certainly the Church is in great difficulty there is this retreat, this attempt to define, to dot the i and cross the t, and all they can do is assert it, and there is no engagement with our contemporary situation or the questions that are in the minds and hearts of people because they are people, not because they are Christian or not or evangelical or conservative or liberal. And, of course, the mainline denominations, likewise, are struggling with some critical issues that threaten to tear apart two or three or four of them and again I think it is because we're all knotted up in this problem of authority. If what we have always been is divinely sanctioned, then I'll fight for it. But, if we could just come to look at one another in the eye and understand the authenticity and the passion of one another's hearts and believe one another and recognize that, out of diverse human experience and diverse kinds of people, these diverse responses are made, if we could live together under the canopy of love, it seems like it would be so simple.

Ezekiel's wonderful vision - Israel is in tough shape. They said our bones are dried up; we're dead. And the voice of the Lord comes to the prophet, "Can these bones live? O, Lord God, You know." Then there was the coming together of the bones and the sinews and the muscles and they were a standing army, but they were still dead until the Spirit of God, the breath of God, blew and brought them alive, and the promises, "O, House of Israel, you shall live by my spirit," says the Lord.

I concluded the Gospel readings with those five verses from chapter 13 of John's Gospel as the passion story opens with Jesus at supper with his disciples, taking a

basin of water and a towel and washing their feet, because I think there's a picture, a symbol, a model of authenticity that is not based on any authoritarian claims. It won't work anymore simply to quote a verse, recite a creed, or call the Church to witness. The authenticity will be demonstrated or the Church will die.

The Church must die to its absolutizing, to its divisions that point to human diversity that are claimed the consequence of divine revelation. The Church must die to its vested interests, its power structures, and it must allow the Spirit of God to blow through it, take a basin and a towel and wash the world's feet, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, be a community of compassion, of passion, of love, and it will not need absolute claims, it will not need an infallible Bible, it will not need some creed that can never again be touched. It could live! It could be real, it would be powerful, and the jaw of the world would drop and say, "My God, behold how they love one another and all God's world." It's as simple as that.