

One Church, One World – Always in Transition

World Wide Communion

Text: Jeremiah 1:9-10; Acts 5:39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. Jeremiah 1:9-10

...if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them - in that case you may even be found fighting against God! Acts 5:39

Time Magazine comes to my rescue again. This is a special issue, fall of 1992 – “Beyond the Year 2000 - What to Expect in the New Millennium.” It is a very interesting issue, which deals with some futuring prognostication of where things will be in century 21. It reminds us that we are in the stream of history. Our lives are enmeshed in history, and there is no way we can extricate ourselves from it. We are moving toward century 21 - one day at a time. And, as that hinge point of history comes about, we will celebrate not only the entrance of a new year and a new decade, but a new century and a new millennium. We are in the tide of history and we will move with it - whether we wish to or not.

I remember a couple of decades ago a popular song that expresses our human resistance to the inevitability of change and movement. The words went something like this: Make the world go away. Take it off my shoulders. Say the things you used to say, and make the world go away.” We imagine that the Golden Age is behind us. We delude ourselves with the thought that in a former day things were neater, finer, manageable, somehow together. In the midst of the ambiguity and the chaos of our present existence, we long for someone to make the “world go away.” For someone to “say the things they used to say.” But to no avail, for we move in history - whether we wish to or not. And how does one keep one’s balance? How does one keep a sense of who one is? And to whom one belongs? And what one is called to be and to do? In this inexorable movement of history, open-ended toward the future, how do you find your way?

Well, let me suggest that, because we are enmeshed in history, we must be immersed in ritual. I have been hammering away at that - the sacramental

character of the church. Last week I said that it is the experience of worship that is the medium of traditioning. And don't you think I was excited to have my prejudices confirmed when I read the article entitled "Kingdoms to Come," by Richard Osling? He is the Religious Editor of *Time* who prognosticates about the future of religion 100 years hence. Of course, he is imagining, making a guess how it will be. And we will probably not be around in order to see whether he was right. But listen to this paragraph:

Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy with their emphasis on ritual are well suited to a world in which few people bother to read. Theology is a dying art. School children are ignorant of the Bible and hence the rest of their spiritual heritage. The Post Literate Era has been especially difficult for Protestantism which depended so heavily on rationalism and reading. Although old style Protestants are shrinking in numbers, they retain outsized influence because so many of them remain book readers and are thus, inevitably, leaders of the economic ruling class on all continents.

He is saying what I said last week that – in the case of the Roman Catholic Church under oppression in Eastern Europe - it was that implicit faith, it was that spiritual formation at the core of a person that only comes through immersion in ritual, in the worship that becomes mindless because it is so much a part of our depths. It is that that enables us to maintain the tradition and to keep the tradition alive.

Now, I will qualify to say that I am not going to stop thinking or reading or preaching. I don't think one has to do one or the other. I will acknowledge also that ritual can become mindless in the sense of empty, thoughtless, meaningless, and that it can be a manipulative tool. But I will come back to my thesis that I have been sharing with you more and more over the last year or two, and especially in the last months, that it is the sacramental character of the Church - ritual – that acts out what we believe, that will allow us, in the midst of the rush of history's inexorable movement, a sense of identity. It can enable us to know who we are and give us a vehicle by which to tradition the rising generation in their enmeshment in history. We need the immersion in ritual in order to continue to be who we are.

Now I will also say that the only way that it is possible, in the stream of history, to remain the same is to continue to change. To do the same things, we must do things differently. The thing I love about this congregation is the openness to make those changes as time moves and as history unfolds. In order to do the same thing, a willingness to do things differently. There is more on the fork of this congregation this morning than most churches could handle in a decade.

In a few moments we will ordain our Eucharistic celebrants, a new class that has been called and trained and equipped to share the sacrament with you. I can remember the day that the idea dawned on us (not knowing at the time that there were other traditions that had been doing it for a long time!). Colette and I were

talking about the children. We so wanted them to be receptive to the tradition of weekly Eucharist. Yet the 8:30 a.m. service wasn't really doing it. Parents didn't often attend that service with their children. There was a realization that if it was really going to happen for them it needed to happen in their Worship Centers. In order for that to happen, their teachers would need to be prepared. And suddenly the idea just dawned in a moment of insight. Intuitively we knew that it was right. The consistory approved it and we have tested it for a year. Now they have given us unanimous approval to continue.

So again this morning we will ordain a new group of people whose life will be in a special way committed to the sacraments of the church. And as the eucharist liturgy is experienced this morning, the children remain here, in order that they may connect what we do here with what they do in their Worship Centers weekly, in order that when they come to their own years of discretion and adulthood and responsibility, they will have been exposed there and here, to the power and meaning of sacrament in the midst of worship. Traditioning them in the context of worship where the heart, the being, is open to all and to the wonder of God. Not a rational, intellectual, pedagogical, didactic attack on them week after week, but the invitation to come and to worship. To hear the story, yes, but to hear the story in a way that brings it into their present experience - moves them at their deepest level.

If you want one more reason to congratulate yourselves on a morning like this where we do these innovative things, come at 11:30 when a new form of governance will be suggested to you. In order that this large and dynamic institution may continue to do the same things it has always done, it is going to have to do things differently. It is always incumbent upon us to move with history's flow and in order to do the *same* thing we must keep on changing. We hate it. Often we resist it. There is something in us which would love to have all the loose ends tied up. The Word of God has always been addressed to those who would absolutize that which is only relative. To make absolute something which is only temporary is to fall into idolatry.

The prophets had always to come to Israel. God said to Jeremiah, "Speak to my people." Jeremiah said, "Not me." God said, "Yes, you. I touch your lips. Now go and uproot, pull down, destroy." The Word of God destroy? The Word of God uprooting? The Word of God pulling down? Yes. Pulling down our idols. Shattering our systems, our comfortable ways of being and doing. The Word of God always comes as a word of judgment in order that grace may come. In order that that word may also plant and build. A classic instance of how God's people always block themselves against the newness of God's spirit is the fact that the Jewish authorities rejected the Messiah and crucified the Lord of Glory.

Oh I wish there had been enough Gamaliel's around. In the wake of the resurrection Jerusalem was being turned upside down. With apostolic witness, Gamaliel said to the Sanhedrin, "Look, why are you so overwrought? Why do you

feel so self-important that the whole world is somehow or other in your hands? Remember Thadeus? Well he was quite a number, but he didn't last long. Do you remember Judas, the Galilean? He had a thing going but it came to nothing." Gamaliel said, "My friends, if this thing is of human origin it will fail, but if it is of God, you'll not be able to overthrow it. And you might even find yourself fighting *God*." Oh, that there might have been more Gamaliel's in the history of the Church when the Church fell into idolatry, making absolute what is only relative, wanting something to be eternal which was only for a certain time. Oh that the wisdom of Gamaliel might prevail in the Church as it negotiates the future and moves toward century 21.

There is a way that we can remain faithful and solid and certain in the midst of all the uncertainty. But it is not the risky word of the preacher. It is bread and cup, and water and oil: concrete vehicles of Grace that will allow us to negotiate uncharted waters, to take on any storm, to face any confusion, and to be able to say, "Nevertheless, this bread and this cup speak to me of God's forever never-ending love." These sacraments nurture deep within us a fundamental trust, an implicit trust - in God, in God's Grace, in God's presence with us, in God's Spirit, shattering our forms and renewing our lives: bread, cup, water, oil: sacramental signs which point to God's foundational love deep down in things. So that we can know, come what may, that all will be well - and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. Trust God. Eat. Drink. Trust. All will be well.