

Tradition: Instrument of Continuity and Change

From the series: Future Edge

Text: Isaiah 43:18-19; Luke 2:34

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Cease to dwell on days gone by and to brood over past history. Here and now I will do a new thing; this moment it will break from the bud. Can you not perceive it? Isaiah 43:18-19

Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This child is destined to be a sign which men reject; and you too shall be pierced to the heart." Luke 2:34

I have a book with me - I always have a book, but someone went out of church a few weeks ago and said that the message had reminded them of this book. They said, "The book is really about business and corporations but there is a connection and I think you would be interested in it." So I went out and got it as I always do - I'm always willing to chase down a new book. Sort of like Paul said to Timothy, "always learning and never arriving at the truth," that's me. But this book is called *Future Edge*, written by Joel Arthur Barker. It would be particularly good for some of you women and men who are involved in business and corporations, who are out there trying to make a profit and turn a buck. It's a good book. It's interesting. Its subtitle is *Discovering New Paradigms For Success*. *Paradigms* is a word that was connected with my sermon, because I often talk about paradigms, models, examples, ways of viewing things, setting up structures to visualize that which is invisible, and to deal with that which is intangible. *Future Edge* deals with paradigms for success.

Thomas Khune wrote a book, *The Construction of Scientific Revolution*, some years ago, and that book chronicles the history of science. He showed that scientists are not these wonderful, marvelous, open-minded people that simply respond to every new piece of data, but, rather, scientists are just like theologians. They resist the truth, they close their minds to new data until they can't do it any more and the data explodes in their faces. Then they design a new paradigm and then we have a new revolution. Khune caused quite a stir when he talked about the way science has gone bumping and jerking forward because the data finally compel the scientist to admit that the old model doesn't work any more and that the new model can accommodate more data and move us forward.

Hans Küng, the theologian, took that idea and applied it to the church. He recognized that in the history of the church there have been several paradigms - the ancient church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic Traditionalism, and then there was Protestant Orthodoxy. Then there was Protestant Liberalism. The difference between the church and scientific community was that, when the scientific data demand that there be movement, the old scientific paradigm has to give way and a new paradigm prevails. The church doesn't have to do that. You just start another church. That's how it is done. So you have one paradigm in this particular group and this group continues. And you have another paradigm and another group continues. You've got all these paradigms and all these groups. You don't let the data bother you. When you are in the church you don't let data bother you; it's "don't bother me with the facts, my mind's already made up." So all these paradigms can live next to each other in the church.

But it's different in the business world. Those of you who are out in the business world are not in the same endeavor as I am. For those of you who are out in the business world, you are not in a non-profit endeavor as I am. Do you know how you know whether you are in trouble? Very simple. The bottom line. You can't stay in business very long if you are not making a profit. It's just that simple. And that makes business people marvelously open-minded and flexible, and able to move with the moving cultural themes, with the demands of the times, with the spirit of the age. Business folk are always tuned in to today, always trying to be ahead because, after all, what they are about is making a buck. In order to prosper you have to be ahead of the game. You don't have to do that in the church. In fact, there are people who moved out of the business world and got into the church or the public sector because in the church and the public sector, (government service, education,) you don't have to make a profit. You don't have to be productive or fruitful. If you are in government and it's not working, you just raise the taxes. In government you are lucky enough to be able to enforce the tax, you see. So what you can do is you can be in debt. Future generations to the third and fourth generations of those who will come to hate us. Four trillion dollars or something. You can enforce the taxation and, as long as you can keep the money coming in, the debt escalates but it functions - it still looks alive. Now you can't do that in business. That's why in business people are always trying to understand where things are moving and what is happening.

Someone else saw a paradigm and thought of me and gave me this seminar announcement, called Paradigm Shifting. People resist change. New ideas most often come from the fringe, the unexpected places. They are often rejected by the best-intentioned decision makers. The models we live by every day may be the very roadblocks that prevent our businesses from progressing and staying ahead of competition. Our models filter information, often preventing us from seeing opportunities vital to the creating or improving of products and services. What do we do when our models become counterproductive and must be altered? In

business you change because you've got to turn a profit or you are going to be out of business.

In government you can add some more taxes. That's what we have tried in churches too. The Reformed Church in America is raising the assessment every year because, when things aren't working and people aren't supporting spontaneously and don't really have that feeling that this is really where things are, then you assess. What you don't get voluntarily, you assess. The church gets in trouble with assessing. The trouble is, it is not as successful as the government at that because we can't enforce that. I wish there were a way to enforce that, but I don't know - we just have to depend on your voluntary good will. It's a terrible way to live for me, but anyway - the church is somewhere between the government and business. In business you change "by cracky." I mean you are not locked into anything forever if it's not working. In the government you can keep going for a long time in a wrong path as long as you've got the enforcement to raise the revenue. The church is somewhere in between. We've got a special problem too. We have our structures and our forms, our liturgical forms and our doctrinal statements, etc. They are not simply something that arose at one time because they worked well or they said it well; they are identified in our minds with God and with truth. So that's why in the church we perpetuate these forms even when they no longer are really doing it. We kind of cover it over with a cloak of piety, and, if it's not working any more and people are dropping off or aren't supporting, we tend to say that people are hard hearted or unspiritual, or they are not as good as they used to be, or they don't care any more. That's not true, of course. But it makes us feel good if our numbers are falling off, etc. I'm talking about the larger church now.

Denominations are really in trouble. The Reformed Church in America is in trouble. We are trying desperately to find some way to shore up the structures. We try a little harder. We run a little faster. Of course that doesn't work. You just get out of breath. But the Reformed Church in America is not unique. The denominations generally in this country are in trouble. The reason they are in trouble is that they are yesterday's forms and structures that cannot do what needs to be done today. But in the church we don't change very easily. We are not in business. If somehow we could find a way to change this whole religion business into a profit-making enterprise, we would be more ready to change. But here we don't have to change because we can keep the thing going, appear to be living yet, while it is dead - deader than a "dodo."

Then suddenly one day we wake up and we call a conference, like the conference I am going to. I am going to leave here this afternoon and go to Boston to Brandeis University and there is going to be a conference of Protestants, Catholics and Jews at the Center For Modern Jewish Studies, and the subject is "Congregational Affiliation." Now you know why you call a conference about Congregational Affiliation? It's because people aren't affiliating any more. If you are involved in the institution, you have a vested interest in the institution. You

may even think the institution is valuable. You call a conference and you say, "Let's not talk theology - Protestants, Catholics and Jews - but let's talk about synagogues and churches and cathedrals and why people aren't affiliating like they once did." We've got a problem, in other words. And so we are going to sit down and talk about it, and you only do that when you have a sense of foreboding, and you finally say, "Something isn't working any more."

Now you know, we probably ought to be the people that are the first in the whole church to offer some word of counsel about openness to newness. We are the heirs of the 16th century Reformation of the Church, and the one insight in the 16th century that is eternally valuable is that insight that nothing is spoken as eternally true, or timeless. The Church in its forms and utterances, in its life, is caught up in history and must always be moving with history and, therefore, it needs constantly to be opening its eyes and cocking its ears to catch what the Spirit is saying to the Church in order that the Church may be tomorrow what it was yesterday.

Now you've probably heard a lot of Reformation Day sermons in which the big point was that the Church rediscovered justification of faith through grace, or the centrality of the word of God, or the priesthood of all believers. I mean, you've probably already heard that in Protestant churches. You might have heard me preach it on occasion, as though, after the 16th century we discovered that. That's ridiculous. That's presumptuous.

The Catholic Church had grace. The Catholic Church had the Word. It had a lot of other stuff too. But so do we. Eastern Orthodoxy had grace, and it had truth, and it had Christ, and it had sacrament. The 16th century was not the birth of the evangelical church in the sense of some pristine understanding of Christian truth for the first time. The 16th century was a time when the forms shattered and at least part of the Church recognized that what ought to always be true of the Church is that the Church is being re-formed according to the word of God and needs to be constantly being re-formed. That's our central insight. That's the thing that has shaped us and characterizes us at our heart. So we ought to be the Church that leads the pack in looking at the world and studying the word of God and seeking to determine what God is calling the Church today and tomorrow. Because we are an historical institution with a human dimension that is constantly moving and, like I said, if it were a matter of raising a buck or two I would take Joel Barker and we'd study "Paradigms for Success," and we would make all the adjustments necessary in order to get the job done.

But, we are not business. And we may not be able to live forever like the government because we can't just raise the taxes. Sometime or other we are going to have to come face to face with that which is the very heart of our tradition: that we never arrive, but we need constantly to be in the process of being reshaped and reformed in order that we may be all that God would have us to be today and tomorrow, as we have given witness to God's grace in the past.

This is our Reformation heritage. And I do believe that it is incumbent upon us, and maybe Christ Community Church to be a catalyst in the larger church to get the attention of the church to say, "We aren't making it any more. We are losing money." You know, Stemple may survive. Gehan is in trouble. Something is going to happen there. But in the church it takes a couple of hundred years to come to that awareness. Now, why don't we get smart and get honest, and be true to our Reformation heritage and recognize that the church is in trouble because it is perpetuating anachronistic structure and giving yesterday's answers to today's questions?

Well, there are a couple of temptations that we face as human beings who would be the people of God. There is the temptation to inordinate pride where we see the world as a human project and see this past as something that is dependent upon our ingenuity and our capacity, as though God was on vacation or had taken a furlough, or was some kind of blasé observer and spectator of the human scene and not engaged. There are those who would take the stance of aggressive activism, take the bull by the horns, and consequently they become bulls in china shops. As though anything that is going to happen in the Church today and tomorrow is dependent upon human ingenuity and planning and decision making. But there is an equally deadly peril on the other side. And that is kind of a passive resignation, as though one simply has to wait for God to move; as though perhaps, in 16th-century terminology, there is some kind of divine predestination where the whole thing is set anyway and we just sort of twiddle our thumbs and watch it happen without our involvement and our engagement, and the engagement of our minds and of our hearts, and our commitment.

No. The Church of Jesus Christ, you and I, are called to be salt in the world and light to the world, to be a catalyst agent to galvanize the people, the larger populace, in the things that are really significant and eternally important. It is for us to hang loosely, knowing our past, but open to the future. It is for us to know our tradition in order that we may negotiate tomorrow. Tradition. The Christian tradition. *Our tradition is an instrument for continuity and change.* Now to be an instrument for continuity is obvious. For our tradition had shaped us and made us what we are. We know who we are because of where we come from: those who have shaped us - Reformed us - that stream that is issued in us today. So it is obvious that tradition is an instrument of continuity. It gives us rootage. It gives us a place to stand, a sense of identity. Terribly important. We must never play fast and loose with it. We must know it well. We must be steeped in it.

But tradition also must be an instrument for change. I never understood that until a year ago, when Krister Stendahl, a New Testament scholar, and David Hartman, a rabbi, who was born in Brooklyn and now is in Jerusalem, had an all day interfaith dialogue in Muskegon. It was a wonderful interfaith dialogue. Krister Stendahl had just spent some time as a bishop of a Lutheran Church in Stockholm. He had been exposed to contemporary Swedish society, and that was so vivid in his experience. But he had relatives in Minnesota where all the

“Svedes,” except for Karl Lundgren lived. All the Swedes live in Minnesota. (Laughter) He said, “If you would go to Minnesota and you visit the “Svedes” in Minnesota, it’s like seeing them 100 years ago. He said I used to go visit my grandparents. It’s wonderful because you have all these old customs and they still survive, and they are passed along. It’s like a visit to yesterday.

But he said, “If you want to know Swedish tradition in its living form, you don’t go to Minnesota. You go to Sweden.” I could have told him, you don’t have to tell me about the Swedes, I can tell you about the Hollanders. (Laughter) I live in a Dutch ghetto in Western Michigan, but I have lived four years in the Netherlands, and I’ll tell you, you wouldn’t know that the one came out of the other. But that is because an immigrant mentality moves out of its location and into another location and it sets in its heels. It builds high walls. It has certain things that it is fleeing, and certain things it wants to preserve, and so it becomes a very well set tradition and it holds on - it is true of Hollanders and Poles and Germans and Swedes, and whomever you want to call. It is a human characteristic. Tradition needs to be living so that it can lead us into the future.

Stendahl says if you want an example of tradition as a museum piece, let me tell you about the boa constrictor. Some of you were here years ago when John Greller was our youth director. John Greller as youth director, in order to force discipline, used to keep a boa constrictor on the premises. It had a wonderful calming effect upon the children. (Laughter) A boa constrictor occasionally wiggles out of its skin. And there’s the skin. So Stendahl says, a sociologist grabs the skin and he examines the skin, the texture of the skin, he stuffs the skin, he puts it in a glass case and he says, “There’s a snake.” Stendahl says, “No, it’s not a snake. The snake has wriggled out of its skin and it’s off somewhere calming the children another day. It’s making its new tradition over here.”

Now you go to Minnesota if you want to see a museum piece of Swedish tradition; you go to Stockholm if you want to see living Swedish life. (Speaking in accent) “I willa go to-a Minnesota.” I have heard so many people who went to the old country – as I grew up as a Dutch kid, Dutch people who went to the Netherlands – and came back shocked. They couldn’t get back to western Michigan fast enough. That Godless place. And it isn’t even clean any more, they say. But that’s where the Dutch tradition is. Not here. This is a museum piece. Sweden in Minnesota is a museum piece.

Living tradition is always where the edge of the community is growing, where its life is moving. Now the Christian Church in large measure has made tradition a museum piece, and we have been in the business of guarding and preserving and perpetuating rather than seeing ourselves as a catalyst in society to move into the future, to help people learn fundamental trust in the God who created, the God of our faithful past who is equal to the future and beckons us because God always goes before us. God is always ahead of us while we are crouching in the bushes trying to protect ourselves. Living tradition is our connection with our past and

the means by which we can move into the future unafraid - with confident trust in the Eternal God. This Reformation Sunday, we acknowledge that the best insight of the 16th century was that the Church needs constantly to have its ear cocked and its eyes open to see where the Spirit of God is leading it - in the future.

This afternoon I will fly to Boston and I will go to Brandeis University to the Center For Modern Jewish Studies and we will convene at 7:00 p.m. The young lady who is organizing the conference called a week ago and she said, "You know, we Jews aren't too heavy on worship and prayer, and we never even thought about it but we got to thinking that maybe we should have some prayer together." She said, "We are going to have a Catholic reflection on Tuesday morning, and a Torah service on Monday morning, and would you lead the Protestant worship on Sunday night?" I said, "Yes, I would." And I thought, it's Reformation Sunday, it's to be a Protestant worship, there ought to be a word of God. I said, "Do you have any music?" She said, "No, we don't have music." I said, "Well, I'll be forced to preach." (Much laughter) So I am going to preach.

You want to know what else? Do you have time to hear the sermon? Sure you have. I am going to suggest to this group gathered to study the matter of congregational affiliation – translation: the lack of affiliation – I am going to suggest that what we really need to do on this Reformation Sunday is for us to come from Geneva to go back to Rome. What might have happened if the religious establishment of the 16th century had been open to listen to Martin Luther, to hear what he had to say, to take seriously the critique rather than a defensive posture and cast him out? What might have happened? There might have been no Reformation, because it might not have been necessary.

I am going to ask what might have happened if the religious establishment in the 10th century, when the Western Church excommunicated the Eastern Church, had been more concerned about the Gospel and true spirituality than playing power politics. That's all that the split in the Eastern and the Western Church was about in the 10th century. It was pure, simple, raw power politics. It had nothing to do with truth. I am going to raise the question - What might it be like today if, when Mohammed had his visions in the 7th century and he went to the village 90 miles north of Mecca to plead with the Jewish community to hear him, what might have happened if the Jewish community, the established religious group at the time, had been open to hear his vision rather than cast him out? Out of which casting out arose Islam. And then, I am going to raise the question as to what might have happened if the 1st century Jew, Jesus the Nazarene, had been received as a spokesman of a deep spirituality in the Hebrew tradition rather than as one who was undercutting the tradition of the Hebrew people? Just think about it. What if we could go back from Geneva to Rome, to Constantinople to Mecca and to Jerusalem? I am going to suggest, very simply, this evening that we dismantle it all - Judaism, Islam and Christianity. That we dismantle it all - and start over again as children before one common God and Creator, Redeemer, who calls us to Shalom.

Well, it's a simple proposal isn't it? (Laughter)