

Journey With Us Toward New Horizons

Text: Genesis 12:1; Hebrews 11:8, 10

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
September 13, 1998

Transcription of the spoken sermon

This is always a wonderful Sunday for us. There is a vibrancy in the air and electricity; there is anticipation, and so we have a moment again of new beginnings - new beginnings for the church year, for the educational year, for a new intentionality and seriousness in making this place a place of deep reflection, a place of education, study, taking faith seriously and trying to create a whole congregation of theologians. The invitation this year is COME, JOURNEY WITH US - Toward New Horizons. The image is that of the journey, which is a biblical image, very common biblical image of the life of faith, the pilgrimage of faith. And, Toward New Horizons - it is always so for the people of God, always called, as was Abraham, to go into the future, claiming the future by faith, with confidence, because of the one who calls us.

Today I want to think with you about *thinking the faith*, about the serious wrestling with the Christian tradition, so that it is more than a matter of rote, recitation, and simple perfunctory, habitual action, but that it is that which arises out of the center of our being and is pursued with dedication and commitment, with seriousness. Next week Peter will talk to you about another aspect of that journey, which is the whole matter of spiritual formation, for it is not enough to think the faith. There is a hunger within all of us for the experience of God, the experience of faith. On the third week, Bob will call you to compassionate action, because the faith that we *think* and the God that we *experience* is not simply a luxury to be enjoyed in splendid isolation, but is that which shapes us and forms us to be instruments of God for the carrying out of God's purpose of *compassion* and justice and love in this world. So, it is a time of new beginning. At Christ Community, we are on a journey. It has ever been so. But, it is so in a new, serious manner as we speak, because we have a new charter of freedom and a great opportunity to find that translation of the Christian tradition that finds resonance with our contemporary experience. That is what we are trying to do.

As Gary Eberle, in his book, *The Geography of Nowhere*, has said, "The old maps don't work anymore. The early cartography you've seen in books, the shape of a world as it was conceived, those maps were wrong. They were based on an

inadequate understanding of the physical universe. But the mapmakers did, in the forming of those maps, have a sense of orientation, and those maps did help people to have an understanding of where they were in the world. We know today that those old maps are archaic. They're simply wrong. And today we have this global positioning system where you can be steaming in a boat in the middle of Lake Michigan and turn that on and from a satellite it will point out exactly where you are. In such a day, in such an age where we can pinpoint our location on the planet, we recognize that there are many of us who don't really know where we are. Because the old institutions have crumbled, and the old authority structures have been called into question.

Just to create a little envy in those of you who aren't going with us to Geneva this afternoon, where we'll spend a few days with the ghost of John Calvin over our shoulder, and then, if you really want to get jealous, I would tell you that we're going down to Provence in the south of France, to lollygag on the Riviera. But, on the way down, we'll stop at Avignon and, in order to prepare a little bit for that for the people going with us, I was reading again of that old church history and was reminded that it was in the 1300s that the papacy moved out of Rome and moved to the south of France, Avignon, and one of the old wonders that we'll visit and tour in another week is the Palace of the Popes, and it's a very splendid place, I understand. I have not seen it. But, the Palace of the Popes in Avignon was a sign of the wealth of the papacy in the 1300s. This was the age of the domination of the church and the papal structure found ways to tax and charge fees and to gain money by hook or by crook, so that the income of one of those popes in those 60 or 70 years in which the papacy was in Avignon was better than three times that of the king of France. (I'd always thought I'd wanted to be a Cardinal, but I think I might as well go all the way and try to be a pope). My point in bringing this up is that, in this time, the Pope was the most powerful person on earth. He was a religious figure and the church dominated the continent of Europe, and the kings groveled before the papal authority because the papal authority had the keys of the kingdom. The papal authority could excommunicate a person and shut them out of heaven. Or, on the other hand, open the gates of paradise.

Think of it. That was the world. The king groveled before the Pope because he believed that the church was a divine institution on this earth that literally controlled the gates of the kingdom. Now, if you have that kind of power, you can do anything you want to, and you can control the masses, let alone the monarchs of the earth. That was the world; that was what was believed. The kings groveled before the religious authority, and it works if you believe it. And, if you believe it and you have a dominating religious figure, you can control society, you can manage people, you can manage morality, for example. They say that Moscow was a very moral place during the heyday of the Communist regime. Dictators, potentates, totalitarian powers can control people, and there are those who believe that people need to be controlled. There, in Avignon, is a palace to witness to the power and the authority of the religious authority that dominated the world.

But also in Geneva is the memorial to the Reformation in which that institution that had grown corrupt and fat began to crumble before the waves of reform. But, even the Reformation would still, on the basis of authority, make the Bible the authoritarian power that the Pope was in the Catholic communion. John Calvin did everything he could with the elders of Geneva to control the morality of Geneva. Authoritarian power and domination.

Well, is it any wonder that once that institutional form began to shatter that the human spirit eventually emerged to a point where it threw off all kinds of authoritarian hold? Isn't it humanly understandable, isn't it perfectly obvious, human beings being who human beings are, that, where there is a crack or a fissure in the structure and the daylight comes through, it will go like this? And so we have the Age of Reason and we have the ascendancy of the human intellect and the honoring of human rationality to a fault, as we know in our postmodern age, where we have come to recognize that the rational depiction of reality is only a model and a fiction, as a matter of fact, and the human mind and human rationality cannot get itself around the mystery that is life, the ultimate mystery. Nonetheless, we are the products of that move to the modern and we are people who take for granted that non-authoritarian way of living. Modern society will no longer tolerate a church or a book or a tradition that shuts down its mind and simply calls it blindly to follow through the labyrinths of life.

Robert Bellah, one of the most acute observers of society, a sociologist in this country, in an essay about religious evolution, cited Tom Paine, at the Age of Reason, who said, "My mind is the church," and Thomas Jefferson who said, "I am a sect." Then Robert Bellah went on to say that the modern period has come to accept the fact that people will join themselves voluntarily to institutions. There is no compulsion for you to be here, to be a member of this institution, and one of the marks of the church in our day is that its voluntary nature is recognized. There is no longer that coercion. If you live in this block, you are not automatically a member of this parish, and therefore coerced to be a part of its institution. Robert Bellah says that private, voluntary, religious association in the west achieved full legitimation for the first time in the early modern situation.

But then he goes on to say, in the full flowering of modernity, will there be another kind of institutional structure that will be able to encompass the freedom, even the autonomy of the human person? Will we find some kind of institutional forms that will be supportive and helpful and give guidance and direction, but apart from the kind of authoritarian control that was imposed from the outside? He says, rather than interpreting these trends, this fragmentation in society where we go our own way and start our own clubs and our own denominations and our own congregations - rather than interpreting these terms as significant of indifference, of secularization, I see in them the increasing acceptance of the notion that individuals must work out their own ultimate solutions and that the most the church can do is provide a favorable environment for doing so without imposing on them a prefabricated set of answers.

Bellah says in the modern situation, the contemporary situation, it is the task of the church to create here an arena, an ambience for the pursuit of the religious quest, for the asking of the questions, for the struggle and the wrestling with the issues of life, but no longer will it be tolerated that we impose upon you a prefabricated structure of belief. That's the way it was. That's the way traditionally it has been, and it will not work anymore, and we are simply at that cutting age where we have accepted that fact, we celebrate that fact, and we invite you to journey with us into a future that is unknown and uncharted, because that is the very nature of the human pilgrimage of faith. Bellah says it remains to be seen whether the freedom modern society implies at the cultural and personal, as well as the social level, can be stably institutionalized in large-scale societies. Yet, the very situation that has been characterized as one of the collapse of meaning and the failure of moral standards can also, and I would argue, more fruitfully, be viewed as one offering unprecedented opportunities for creative innovation in every sphere of human action.

Now, that's the very same note that was sounded earlier when I read that excerpt from Gary Eberle. Will there be, out in the future, some reconfiguration of the institutional life of the human family that will be able to embrace our questions and our quest? Who knows? But, one thing we know - you cannot go back to yesterday. To go back to yesterday, you might as well go back to Avignon. You might try to re-invent a world where the Pope can subdue the king or the President. But it won't work. And I don't want to go back to such a world. I want to be able to think. I want my own belief and my own faith to rise out of the center of my own being; I want to believe what I believe. I want to be able to think about it so that what I believe is what I really think, so that I really believe it, so that it's a reflection of the authenticity of my humanness. No one is going to put it on me. Not an institution, not a book, not a tradition. I'll use the institution for every value it has; I'll value this book and study it and mine its treasures; I'll respect that tradition and gain all of its wisdom, all the wisdom I can from it. But, it will finally be my journey, my pilgrimage, my faith, my insight, because it's my life! And I invite you to journey with me, and to think about it, so that it is a thought-full journey of faith.

I'm afraid that in many churches today, the situation in our country will be berated and the President will be berated and all of that despair will be everywhere. Well, that's the very time for the people of God, recognizing our total vulnerability, all of us, recognizing the weakness in the heart and center of all of us, recognizing that the decay and the distortion that is present everywhere is not the consequence of some fall from perfection, but is simply the clinging of the slime and the mud from which we're emerging.

I believe in the future! Because I believe in God! I believe in the human family because I believe the Spirit of God is nudging us, beckoning us ever onward. I believe in a world of the future marked by justice and by grace and by compassion because that's in this book. This book tells me that the image is the journey. We

are on the way. Abraham was called to go out, not knowing where he was going to go. He was 75 years old and married to a barren woman. When God would start a new beginning out of the chaos of Genesis, of the garden scene, of the flood scene, of the Babel scene - when God would start a new beginning, when God would form a people, he starts with human impossibility; he starts with an old man and a barren womb in order to create newness. And the writer to the Hebrews was writing to an early church in the wake of Jesus. People who were followers of Jesus, but who were getting weak knees, who looked about them and were becoming dismayed, who didn't know if they could hold on anymore, and he said, "Hold on. Be strong. Faith is the conviction of things not seen, it is the evidence of things hoped for." Look at old Abraham. Look at Sarah. They went out; they didn't know where they were going, but they simply heard the voice of God and they followed to be the people of God.

To be a biblical people is to be a people not settled, not fixed, not set in concrete. It is to be a people who are on pilgrimage, who don't know what the future holds, who are willing to take all the tradition and all the wisdom of the book and all of the institutional forms and use them for all they're worth, but to submit to none of them, not to submit one's mind and one's heart. It is to be a person who believes, who thinks and who goes, confident, because God is God.

That's where we're going, by God. Then, don't despair. Don't let your tail drag. Stiffen the weak knees. Let there be a glint in your eye. Believe in the future; believe in possibilities; believe and know, as Bob offered in his prayer, that we create our future because we recognize that we don't stand here as puppets on a string, but as responsible human beings who are called to journey and faith toward new horizons with confidence and joy.

References:

Robert Bellah, "Religion in Human Evolution," *American Sociological Review*, 1964.

Gary Eberle. *The Geography of Nowhere: Finding Oneself in the Postmodern World*. Sheed and Ward, 1995.