

“Luke versus Leviticus”

Sunday, October 24, 2010: Luke 18:9-14

The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector

Carol King sang, “I feel the earth move under my feet, I feel the sky tumbling down.” How about you, do you feel the earth moving under your feet, a seismic shift causing you to wobble, or lose your balance? Is the sky tumbling down around you? Do you want to run into the street like Chicken Little crying, “The sky is falling, the sky is falling!”

Well if you are paying attention to what’s happening in the Christian Church these days then you should respond with a resounding yes to these questions, because all of these things are happening. The earth is moving!

Mainline denominations, including the Episcopal Church, are in a precipitous decline. In the 1950’s mainline religious affiliation and church attendance was normative in America. In 2010 mainline denominations are barely a blip on the radar screens of most Americans. Average Sunday attendance is dramatically down. Our beautiful – and old – buildings require enormous amounts of money for maintenance, diverting money from vital ministries. Increasing numbers of parishes do not support full-time clergy. Programming is being slashed. Both are due to steep declines in financial resources. By the way; I focus on clergy because studies reveal that parishes without full-time clergy go into decline; at least in the current model of how we do church.

Fifty parishes in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland alone have been closed due to clergy shortages, finances, and theological differences with Roman. Schisms are occurring in the Anglican, ELCA, and Presbyterian Church’s. One third of White Catholics no longer adheres to Church practices or attends church on a regular basis.

On the east side of Cleveland (City and inner-ring suburbs) there are eight Episcopal churches – twenty years ago there were at least three more. Two of the eight no longer support full-time clergy. Two others mostly like will reduce their clergy’s status to part-time in the next few years. Two support clergy through a sizable drawdown on endowment principle, (we are one of those.) The other two are financially sound and support clergy through pledge, plate and interest-only draw down on endowment.

Predictions are that the collapse of Evangelical churches is imminent due to declining numbers, superficial spirituality and being over-mortgaged for those huge building complexes they occupy. Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral is the first domino to fall.

A recent Pew study of religious knowledge in America portrays Christian’s as woefully ignorant of the Bible and the basic tenants of their denominations. Atheists know more about Christianity than the average person in the pews.

These stories replicate themselves throughout the Church. My friends, Christianity and the Church we know are collapsing around us. The earth is shaking and the sky is tumbling down. The Church we are baptizing little Saya River into today will not be recognizable to her – or to us - by the time she graduates college. It will be radically different.

As Betty Davis said in the classic film All About Eve, “fasten your seatbelts, it’s going to be a bumpy night.”

In her recent book “The Great Emergence” the Episcopal author Phyllis Tickle states that every 500 years there is a great upheaval in the Christian Church. We had the fall of the Roman Empire in 481 that led to the rise of the Church as a political power. We had the great upheaval caused by the Great Schism between the Greek and Latin Churches in 1051, resulting in Roman and Orthodox Christianity. We experienced the great emergence of the Protestant Reformation in 1517. And now in 2010 we are experiencing the newest upheaval. As Tickle says, “The Great Emergence is an every 500 year phenomenon, we’re just lucky; we get to live through one.”

Upheavals are alarming. None of them occurred without immense change, strife and pain. Yet Tickle’s belief that we are lucky to live through one is accurate. Great upheavals are macro-incarnations of the emerging of God’s rein. Each of them has been necessary to reform and renew the Church allowing the unfolding of God’s purposes in the world.

All upheavals find their genesis in the great emergence of Jesus' ministry and the nascent Christian Church in the first century. And the emergence currently roiling the Church finds its roots in the Gospel story of the Righteous Pharisee and the tax collector, which we heard this morning.

In this parable we have a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee was a person of elite status, education, and respectability who meticulously followed the Mosaic Law.

The tax collector is at the opposite end of the spectrum. Tax collecting was a despised occupation among the Jews of first century Palestine. Tax collectors were agents of the Roman Empire. Because of that the tax collectors were demonized and prevented from engaging the society at large.

Jesus tells us that both men went to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee prays a litany telling God just what a swell guy he is. He does not violate the commandments, he practices fasting and he tithes. He disparages the tax collector and regards him with contempt. He brags to God about his own superiority. Yet there is no recognition of his reliance on God. Essentially he prays to himself.

The Pharisee expresses a faith that looks at the institutional practice of religion and its doctrines as sufficient and complete. This practice of religion is centered on man, not God.

By contrast the tax collector begs God for mercy. He acknowledges his sinfulness and he beats his breast in humility. He realizes he has no standing before God – certainly not according to the institutional religion – and he begs for mercy.

The tax collector is someone who sees that faith is about right relationship with God.

Jesus shocks his listeners telling them that it is the tax collector and not the Pharisee who is justified before God. Right relationship to legalism and tradition do not save you, only right relationship to God does. It is the Pharisee and the tax collector dichotomy that are at play in the current emergence we are experiencing.

Imagine for a moment that the Church is the ancient giant statue the Colossus of Rhodes that straddled the harbor of Rhodes in Greece.

Like the Greek one, the Church Colossus has two legs straddling the harbor of the Christian faith. One leg represents the Pharisee, the other the tax collector. Both are firmly planted on opposite shores. History tells us a strong earthquake hit Rhodes in 226 BCE and the Colossus tumbled down. That's what happening in the Church today, the earthquake is tumbling it down.

This is a bit of an over-simplification but accurate. Essentially the Church today has one leg representing people who worship the institution of religion and are strictly keeping the letter of the law and the tradition, observing it to a fault. These people take great pride in their scrupulousness. The problem is somewhere the God of Jesus has gotten deleted. For these people religion ends up being all about them.

The other leg of the Church believes this approach is wrong and not in alignment with the Gospel of Jesus. These people tend not to presume that they have their faith all figured out and that they can not in totally know the mind of God. They are open to hearing God's word anew as God's reign unfolds in history.

In a nutshell these opposing approaches to faith legs create a conflict between those who believe religion is about adhering to the legalisms of Leviticus versus those who believe that religion is about the abundant grace of the Gospel of Luke.

Because the Church is largely defined by people, both in and outside the Church, as being the former and not the later, the earthquake that is collapsing the Church is a combination of internecine conflict as well as irrelevance, disdain, and boredom.

Are you familiar with Anne Rice the author of the Vampire Chronicles? After being an atheist for much of her life, Rice returned to her Roman Catholic roots twelve years ago. This past summer Rice caused a stir by announcing that she was leaving Christianity. She stated, "For those who care, and I understand if you don't: Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being "Christian" or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to "belong"

to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else."

"In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen."

Rice represents the leg of the tax collector reacting to the leg of the Pharisee. Her problem is she mistakenly chooses to plant her leg on the wrong side of the shore. Many people do that, not realizing there is another way of being Christian and so they abandon the Church. And Christianity as we know it collapses.

Yet it is in Anne Rice that the collapsing Church glimpses a vision of what is emerging. While no longer adhering to the legalisms and doctrines of the institutional Church, Rice clings passionately to Jesus Christ. Her faith relationship is all about her relationship with God; it is all about following Jesus.

As the earthquake gets shakier we must come to that same understanding in our faith life. What is critical, in fact the only thing our faith can be about is following Jesus. Authentically following him is the life boat that will see us firmly planted on the shore of a renewed and vibrant emerging Christian faith. That is definitely something worth living through!

Amen