

Embraced by a New Future

Luke 24:36-48

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Last year on the puddle jumper flight between O'Hare and Madison, I sat next to an elderly woman, a United Methodist from Eau Claire. We got talking about the church, and she asked me, "why is it that we Methodists say "trespasses" in the Lord's Prayer while you Presbyterians say "debts?"

That question got this seminary trained church professional going: from the way we translate the New Testament to a little church history, and finally on to the ecumenical version of the Lord's Prayer, which in my view is really the best translation: "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

While my United Methodist seatmate listened intently, the young High School senior from Madison next to her in the window seat looked dazed. As our plane landed, she turned to us and asked, "What exactly *is* the Lord's Prayer?"

We sat in stunned silence. *How could anyone not know anything about the Lord's Prayer*, was my first thought. And then I felt a bit embarrassed. It was as if the Methodist and the Presbyterian had had a 20-minute discussion about insider baseball, insensitive to our seatmate who didn't really know anything about the game itself.

The high school student's innocent question was a telling reminder to me of the sea change now taking place in the United States. No longer does our culture reflect the ethos of mainstream Christianity; at least in the way you and I were raised to believe it does or think it should. The Lutheran across the street, the Episcopalian next door, and the Roman Catholic who lives on down on the corner of the block is no longer a reflection of the real world.

Most of our Dane County neighbors, in fact, have no church affiliation. On my block on Madison's near east side, I am the only one who goes to church. The truth is, an ever-increasing number of our neighbors, like the young woman in the window seat, have had absolutely no experience or contact with the Christian church, or more importantly, with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Add to that, fueled by the pandemic, forty million American Christians have stopped going to church over the last decade.

And while the culture has changed, the church in North America, for the most part, continues to focus in my view on a discussion about insider baseball as if the culture will understand. When I have gone to national church meetings of the Presbyterian Church, and I have gone to many over the last 25 years, it seems that we are either grieving because things are not what they used to be, or we are anxiously trying to re-create the greatness of glory days gone by.

I invite you this morning to join me in taking a different tact. Instead of focusing on our grief about the way things are in the church these days, and instead of spinning our wheels trying to recreate what once was and will never be again, let's join the disciples on that Emmaus Road, meet our risen Lord, and be embraced by a new future. What will the church of Jesus Christ look like in the year 2050, at the mid-point of this century?

The first thing I imagine about 2050 is that the church will no longer be a national bureaucracy but look and feel more like a missionary movement. The private sector abandoned the bureaucratic model decades ago. The public sector is busy reinventing itself, though having a tougher time letting go of old patterns. I imagine that the church of 2050 will look less like the corporation of the mid-20th century and more like the missionary church launched by the risen Christ on that Emmaus Road and finding its footing in the Book of Acts.

It will be more organic and less mechanistic, more of a network than a structure, more decentralized, more fluid, flexible, responsive, and accountable to local needs. Most Presbyterian congregations in 2050 will be lay led rather than pastor led, as fewer people are going to seminary.

Like the New Testament Church, it will feel more like a movement at the margins of the culture, and less like a big institution at the center of it.

The primary mission field of the church in 2050 will not be Tanzania, Brazil, or Korea. It will be North America, and in places like Madison Wisconsin. Did you know that the thriving churches in Africa, Asia, and South America are already sending missionaries here—to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, to go about the work of enculturating the gospel in our American post-Christian context, especially with those who have had little contact with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Pastor Dan Kimball, a young evangelical church planter on the west coast, nails it when it comes to understanding the generation of twenty-somethings that is missing from most churches these days.

Challenged by his missionary understanding of the gospel, Pastor Dan leaves his “Christian Bubble” of church friends and colleagues two days each week to hang out at the local coffee houses where young adults congregate. Over time, with his keen listening ear and his gracious, accepting presence, he has developed friendships with a cadre of folks who either grew up in the church and left, or have never darkened our doors.

Kimball summarizes these conversations and their implications for the 21st century church in a fascinating book, *They like Jesus but not the Church: insights from emerging generations* (Zondervan, 2007).

Here’s the surprise. Kimball’s new young adult acquaintances have nothing but good things to say about Jesus: “All loving...perfect...great teacher... a caregiver...approachable...an everyday man who understood the trials and tribulations of others...I have always thought of him as the same person as God...”

But when it comes to the church and to Christians in general, they paint a completely different picture: “Scary... angry...judgmental...arrogant...right-wing finger pointers with political agendas...” While we Presbyterians may not see ourselves in these stereotypes, Kimball argues that we need to pay close attention to these dominant perceptions of the church today in our culture.

Following the example of the first disciples Jesus commissions after Easter, Kimball’s antidote is to practice a radical form of hospitality, of breaking and sharing bread with those who have been wounded by the church or harbor misunderstandings about who we are as a community of faith.

He writes, “Countless numbers of people who like Jesus but not the church are open to receiving an apology from the church and even to forgiving the church when forgiveness is needed. But first they need to be in a relationship with someone they can trust.” And might that be us.

My *second* imagining about the church of 2050 is that it will be a community of *alternative* memory and hope. There is no point trying to live in the past, but there is a point—and a vital one—in remembering the past. Indeed, if the past is *not* remembered, not only are its worst aspects regularly repeated, but there is also a loss of hope for the future. For the building blocks of hope are always salvaged from the ruins of history; and when we forget the slow and painful evolution of our hopes as a civilization, we lose the capacity to renew our hope and to inculcate it in others, notably the young.

Some of the keenest observers of modern mass culture—a culture celebrating, with a certain desperation, only the present and immediate future—feel that our society is already far along the path to historical and cultural amnesia, right now reflected in our nation’s politics.

Still deceived by the shabby myth of progress, that life will continue to get better and better, titillated by technology, many of us Americans are so ignorant of the past that we possess no standards of comparison for assessing the present or the future. Those who are affluent and content are apt to imagine

that ours is the best of all possible worlds; those who are the victims of global economic forces, on the other hand, are left behind, without dreams of a better future. The church that makes its way through our changing culture to a new beginning as the missionary movement of Christ bears within itself the possibility—indeed, the necessity—of being a zone both of memory and hope.

After Easter, the risen Christ shows his disciples his wounds, that he is the same one who was crucified. Hope and memory are inseparable; they are of the warp and woof of discipleship. That is why we give them such prominence: “Do this in remembrance of me,” we hear every time we gather around the Lord’s Table. “Every time we partake of the bread and drink from the cup we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.”

To remember the past—the cross of Christ, and to hope, accordingly, for what we await—the consummation already anticipated by Christ’s resurrection—this memory and this hope is to be set down in the world as an enduring alternative to what the world regularly offers and which the Bible, with great consistency, calls death.

The third thing I imagine about the church of 2050 is that it will not reside in our ethnic enclaves but missionally engaged with the multicultural realities of the day.

The writer Luke, both in his gospel story and in his sequel, the Book of Acts, is always fuzzing up the line between insiders and outsiders. In Matthew’s account of the Great Commission, Jesus meets the eleven remaining disciples alone on a mountain in Galilee where he charges them to make disciples of all nations. But in Luke, the journey on the road to Emmaus includes others outside the inner circle who are not named: perhaps Cleopas, perhaps Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, or perhaps Joseph and Matthias.

The widening of the circle around Jesus, a circle that continues to widen as the missionary movement gets going in the Book of Acts, that widening circle continues to challenge our presumptions that the gospel is simply for us, the church is for us, or for people like us.

The hard news about my third imagining is that thousands of existing congregations in rural America will not survive 25 more years. There are just too many churches for fewer and fewer people, and the grim reality is that many of our country and small-town churches will close.

The good news about this imagining is that, fueled by a missionary spirit, new church plants will be succeeding elsewhere, such the burgeoning super-metropolises of the 21st century like Chicago, Minneapolis, and Atlanta. New Church plants will take root and bear fruit with young singles and elderly Gen X-ers, among the working poor along with the middle class, among African Americans, Asian Americans, recent arrivals from Mexico who work of the dairy farms of rural Wisconsin, and other new immigrant populations.

The missionary zeal of the church in 2050 will be significant not so much in its geographical scope but in its inclusion of those we would never have chosen naturally, moving the church into areas in which it otherwise would not have gone and into activities in which it otherwise would not have engaged. That kind of inclusive missionary zeal will help heal the racism and classicism that today keeps the American Christian family so stuck in our respective ethnic and class-based enclaves.

The challenge of our Risen Lord on that road to Emmaus is that “you—all of you—are witnesses to the presence of the risen Christ in this changing cultural context. To offer a radical hospitality to those suspicious of—or ignorant about—the Christian Church and its gospel; to be the living repository of memory and hope in a culture that is rapidly losing both; and in supporting an inclusive missionary zeal.

As we think about the next 25 years, these are our challenges. These are also tremendous opportunities.

Amen.