

“Can Anything Good Come Out of the Church?” *John 1:35-51*

Scott Black Johnston

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York

The Church is changing. Christianity is changing. This past Friday, in an e-mail to the congregation, I talked about *The Great Emergence*, a book by Phyllis Tickle. In it, Tickle argues that Christianity is in a constant state of change. Most of the time, it is difficult to see this transformation. Yet, like the annual metamorphosis from winter into spring, it *is* happening. One day all is snow and ice, then gradually the temperature warms, daffodils poke their tendrils through the frost, leaves unfurl, flowers bloom, and spring arrives. In the same way, the Church of Jesus Christ is also constantly unfurling, gradually changing. In addition to this slow and steady change, Tickle argues that every 500 years or so, our faith goes through a more massive transformation.

The last of these massive changes happened in the 1500s. In 1517, Martin Luther wrote 95 theses and nailed this list of objections to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther, John Calvin, and other Protestant Reformers raised questions about the established Church's theology, its worship, its standards of rationality, even its hierarchical leadership. Declaring that every individual was responsible for his or her own faith before God (They used the phrase “a priesthood of all believers.”), these reformers pursued a vision of Christianity grounded in democratic principles. In the centuries that followed, this new way of being the Church spread throughout Western Europe, to North America and beyond. Any way you look at it, the Reformation represented a massive change for the Christian faith, and ripple effects from that movement influenced everything from this country's Constitution to the development of modern economic theory.

I mention this history because, according to Tickle, we are now on the cusp of another cataclysmic change in the faith—another shift equal in magnitude to the Protestant Reformation. What signs indicate that we are in for such huge change? Well, let's consider a few challenging facts. In this country, the classic mainline Protestant denominations (the Episcopalians, the United Methodists, the Presbyterians, and the Lutherans) have been losing members and status for at least two decades. In the last two years, even the Southern Baptists have recorded losses. Across the country, surveys report that the number of young people who profess “no involvement with any religion” is on the rise.

The fallout from this decline in membership presents its own set of challenges. In many corners of the United States, Protestant denominations, which went on a great church-building spree in the 1950s, are now struggling to care for facilities that cannot be supported by dwindling congregations. In the Presbytery of New York City, there are 100 churches spread out among the five boroughs. Sixty of these congregations cannot afford to hire a full-time clergy person. These are sobering numbers.

Still, it would be wrong to conclude that Christianity is simply in decline. It's not. In Asia, South America, and Africa, the church is growing at a sprinter's pace. There are now twice as many Presbyterians in Kenya as there are in the United States. In

1950, a list of the world's countries with the largest Christian populations included Great Britain, France, and Italy. Today, those countries have been supplanted by Brazil, the Philippines, and Ethiopia. In 40 years, says sociologist Phillip Jenkins, only one-fifth of the world's Christians will be white. By 2050, Christianity's center of gravity will have moved from the northern hemisphere to the south.

Clearly, tectonic shifts and rapid growth characterize global Christianity. So, what's the deal here at home? Why are American churches suffering? I have heard more answers to this question than there are pigeons in Central Park. Some make sense. Some do not. Here are a few of the most common. American Christianity is suffering:

because scandals have undercut the Church's authority and its message;
because, in the 1980s, the Church got involved with politics and has never recovered from this unholy alliance;
because we are a society more interested in self-help psychology than in a self-sacrificing Messiah;
because we have stagnant worship and dull music;
because we switched to contemporary music with vapid theology;
because our culture's prosperity makes us less able to identify with the poor and downtrodden, who are the heart of Jesus' message;
because we left Grandma behind.

Let me clarify that last comment. According to sociologists like Tickle, America is no longer made up of multigenerational households the way it was 50 years ago.

What does North America's declining faith have to do with the loss of Grandma? In the farmhouse where my mother grew up, across the river in Bergen County, four generations shared a roof. While the middle generations would work the fields, tend to the vegetable stand, and drive the fresh produce into Manhattan, the older generations would watch over the young. In addition to other bits of worldly wisdom, these aunts and grandparents and cousins would pass along the stories of the faith and the habits of daily prayer to the children in their care.

As nuclear, non-extended families became the norm in this country, as grandparents were placed in retirement centers, this crucial mode for passing tradition from one generation to another was lost. Parents began looking to a new-fangled thing, the Sunday School, to transmit faith to their children. Sunday School teachers did their best, but they were no substitute for sitting at Grandma's knee.

Others suggest that it's not really the loss of Grandma. Rather, they argue that American Christianity has declined in recent years because the wider culture has grown increasingly skeptical. Maybe that's true. Although, I doubt it. The Church has always had its skeptics. In fact, at its best, the Church loves its skeptics.

Today's Scripture reading begins when John the Baptist is standing near a road. Seeing Jesus walking by, John extends an index finger and points. "Look," he says, "there goes the Lamb of God." Immediately, two of John's own followers take off after Jesus. The new rabbi is beginning to collect disciples. One of these new followers, Philip, is so excited that he goes and finds his friend, Nathanael, and, in a rush tells him that he has stumbled upon the Messiah. "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael

scoffs at his buddy's claim. "Are you kidding? Nazareth, that podunk village, that's where you think God is going to begin bringing salvation to the world?"

Philip's response to his friend is not defensive. Rather than debate Nathanael, he offers a simple invitation. "Come and see. I know.... It's hard to believe that God would want to get involved in this broken down, messy world. It's *doubly* hard to believe that God would choose the dusty backwaters of Nazareth. Still, there's something beautiful, something true, in how this man speaks. I can't explain it. All I ask is that you come and see."

Nodding at Philip, Nathanael decides to do just that, bringing us to the central moment in today's text. How will Jesus respond? When Jesus sees Nathanael coming, will he condemn the man? Will he chastise him for airing his doubts? No. Jesus greets the skeptic with these words: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" The contemporary Church could learn a lot from the way our Lord responds to Nathanael. Skeptics have always been a part of our faith. Jesus went out of his way to make them feel welcome.

So, what else could explain the malaise affecting American Christianity? Some say the difference between a northern hemisphere that is less religious and a southern hemisphere that is more religious is our access to entertainment. It is difficult, they contend, for churches to compete with the movies, the video games, the television shows, the countless internet sites that clamor for our attention and do it with such style. I read the other day that the production budget for one episode of the popular television program *Glee* runs around \$5 million. In making a 44-minute program ('Gotta leave space for commercials), each episode can command the same amount of resources that it takes to run this church, with its various programs and ministries and outreach, for an entire year. How can we hope to compete with that?

Others take a different angle, suggesting that our North American senses have been so dulled by glitzy lights and constant appeals to our baser instincts that we are no longer able to recognize beauty and truth. A year ago, a man entered a metro station in Washington, D.C. and began to play the violin; it was a cold January morning. He played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was rush hour, about a thousand people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. Three minutes went by before anyone even seemed to notice that there was a musician playing. A few more minutes passed before the violinist received his first tip: a woman threw a dollar into his case and walked away. Most people did not even look up. The person who paid the most attention was a three-year old boy. His mother pulled. The boy dragged his feet. He was determined to listen. Finally, with his mother tugging him along, the child departed—looking back all the time at the violinist. In the 45 minutes the musician played, only six people paused to listen. When he finished and silence took over, no one noticed. No one applauded. No one knew that this man, who had just played one of the most intricate pieces ever written for the violin, was Joshua Bell, one of the most accomplished musicians in the world. Some see this experiment (conducted by the *Washington Post*) to be an indication that we have lost our ability to sift the true and the beautiful out of the static around us. They may be right. Maybe this is the primary problem affecting the Church today. Maybe. Although, I have to confess, I think we are better than that. Or, more accurately, I think God is better than that.

This past Friday, my wife Amy and I went to see *The King's Speech*. The movie is

about King George VI—the monarch of Great Britain during World War II who suffered with a terrible stutter. The movie follows George as he seeks therapy from various individuals and finally from one man, Lionel Logue. At the end of the movie, Logue accompanies the King into a sound studio where he must make the most important speech of his life—a speech explaining why Britain is declaring war on Germany. There are a great many tensions that come to a head at this point in the film, but one of the most powerful is the comparison drawn between the stuttering King and the eloquent Führer. While Hitler’s speeches are fluid, fiery, and emotional, George’s public addresses are sputtering, emotionally flat, and full of awkward pauses. The contrast is stark and painful. So, of course, as the King began to make this crucial radio speech to his people, I found myself rooting for him to nail it. Surely, I thought, that is where the movie is going. He has done all this hard work, and now, during this dark hour, he will shine. He will be as eloquent as the forces arrayed against him and his brave countrymen.

Then he began to speak. He wasn’t eloquent. Not at all. The awkward pauses were still there. There was no fiery emotion. Yes, he was understandable, that was an improvement; but I was looking for more. Come on, George. Nail this. Still, the King droned on. And as he did, I gradually became less conscious of his halting delivery and focused more and more on his words. The King’s words called people to stand up to an evil that was threatening the entire world. The King’s words called people to a time of great sacrifice. The King’s words pointed beyond himself, beckoning people to embrace a higher purpose than they had ever before known. The King’s faltering words rang with truth.

The Church, my friends, is a cracked vessel. It is, as the old hymn goes, “by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.” It is presided over by imperfect, bumbling servants. Compared to the sophisticated world around us, we mumble and sputter in our attempts to get our message out. What keeps us going—though many have counted us out, through centuries of change, through transformations big and small, through the thicket made by our own mistakes—is our attempt to point beyond ourselves to another. “Look, there goes the Lamb of God.”

“Can any good come out of Nazareth?” asks Nathanael. “Can any good come out of the Church?” ask many North Americans. Perhaps the most faithful response we can give in this (and any) age is the invitation that Philip spoke to Nathanael so long ago, “Come and see.”