



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**  
*The Episcopal Church*  
*in Destin, Florida*

10-10-10 Sermon Pentecost 6A  
July 9, 2023

“Emergence Christianity and The Church of the Future”  
A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

Matthew's gospel shaped the early church, but it continues to guide us today. To what can we compare this generation of believers?<sup>1</sup> We live in a polarized world where people express themselves in harmful, sometimes dangerous ways even though social and political things are intentionally separate from the spiritual and the religious. We 21<sup>st</sup> century people need relief from our burdens. But what message would people be receptive to in our modern world?

What if God sent us a messenger, a prophet like John to prepare the way for the Son of God, to come again into our lives? A prophet in our day might come to us dressed in the modern-day equivalent of homespun camelhair. Today a prophet might even look like a serious skateboarder with tattoos. He might not eat locusts and wild honey, but he might prefer a vegan diet to keep himself pure and able to be a conduit of God's message. Might we Episcopalians hear God's message from a biker chick with facial piercings? Could we hear God's message of repentance from such as these? Would we accept the news that God wants us to incorporate Jesus's message into all aspects of our world, that we are to be part of bringing the good news to all people through how we live – not only in our religious and spiritual lives but our social and political as well?

I believe I may have met two unlikely messengers of God's love in the library of a retreat house a few years ago. We were attending a silent retreat in rural Canada. The library was the only place we were allowed to talk. The two young men were dressed like hip-hop performers. They had shoulder to cuff tattoos and piercings. Could they have been part of the church of the future? They were planning their weekly gathering of people for Christian worship in a local coffee house. As we were pouring over Biblical commentaries for future sermons, they were interpreting Scripture for themselves. Later that same week we were blessed to be with the late eminent sociologists Phyliss Tickle

for two days, and in her description of the church of the future, the emergent church, in hindsight I recognized the two young men as possible prophets of the future. They seemed on fire with the zeal for spreading the gospel. I believe that it is from just such as these two modern prophets that the unchurched youth just might receive the word of God – might hear anew Jesus’s saving words.

Our church had sponsored two workshops with Phyllis Tickle *“Leadership for the Emerging Church: Should We Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way?”* for clergy and *“The Church is Dead, Long Live the Church”* for everyone. Toward that end I later took an online course from our seminary: *“Communities of Memory, Communities of Expectation: How to renew the liturgical church so the liturgical church can revitalize Christianity,”*<sup>2</sup> These are long titles to be sure, but they express the dilemma we all face in these changing times. The emergent church is doing just that, revitalizing Christianity. And we in our tradition are a vital part of that revitalization.

We should not be afraid. There is a place for our beautiful liturgy. Indeed many of the emergent churches are using our liturgy as a model of how to do church. At a clergy *Social Media Boot Camp*, I learned that the newer churches that do not have the long history and tradition we are blessed with in the Episcopal Church are using our liturgies as a model for their newer more relaxed worship services. The Boot Camp was an intense several days led by Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This dynamic and energetic preacher/teacher spoke of the inventive age of the world and the church. At morning, afternoon, and evening sessions he taught us how to let the laity guide us in how we worship with the aid of social media. Many of the elderly clergy sat with their eyes glazed over while the younger ones who had more recently graduated from seminary were openly threatened. One young female priest asked: “What then are we left to do?”

Yes, we in the Anglican Communion will have a hard time adjusting to the changes that are happening. And the changes are happening. My sisters and brothers, as Bob Dylan sang “The Times They Are A’Changin.”<sup>3</sup> Yes, I come bearing a message of

change, a change in very core of our culture. But remember that the Jewish worship in the synagogue did not go away with the birthing of the Christian church. Just so in our day the Episcopal Church and our way of worship will not go away. Christianity is not dead. It is alive. It is being reinvented, reborn in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can – and we will – be part of that birthing process. Think of it as a great adventure where together we will discover what it means to be church.

The world as we know it is changing so fast, and the church is changing just as fast. At a week-long seminar on congregational growth and development named “Start-up Start-over”, we were taught that there will be more change in the first 15 years of this century than in all of last century.<sup>4</sup> And here we are into our 23<sup>rd</sup> year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the world is indeed changing at break-neck speed. Phyllis Tickle spoke of this new era as a time of emergence where the church is reinventing itself, an event we cannot escape, an event that happens every 500 years when we question “where then is our authority?” She referred often to the teachings of Brian McLaren who has been dealing with this inevitable change in the church in his many books. I first heard Brian McLaren introduce the notion of this shift in the church (along with Jon Meacham, and others) at a weekend diocesan conference in Texas.<sup>5</sup> But, honestly, none of the speakers I have learned so much from (not Diana Butler Bass and not Barbara Brown Taylor, nor most other speakers who are not afraid of these changes – none were actively leading congregations.

When you love the people you are leading, it is hard to make changes in our beloved church, in her worship or in her organization or in her outreach to the community. But again, the times they are changin’. However, few resist change when they own the changes. Initially clergy were meant to serve as “chaplains and scholars, and part of the authority structure of the town or community”<sup>6</sup> But now our roles have grown and grown, perhaps too large. Do we need to lead, follow or just get out of the way? Yes! As we go forward into the new revitalized church – and we are already on the way – we can have faith that sharing ministry is exactly what Jesus intended. In answer to my colleague’s

question, what we clergy are left to do is to care for our people, pastorally and by feeding them with good liturgy and by opportunities for expanding their understanding of the love of God for all and by teaching them the relevance of the Bible in today's world and by enabling them to complete the great commission to spread the Gospel to all, all the while by lightening the burdens we individually carry by sharing the load. Yes, we and the church can be renewed. It is happening right now. We have the great opportunity to prepare the way, just as those two young men doing coffee house church surely are doing still today. My friends, we – and that is all of us – are to prepare the way of the Lord for the future church but without losing our traditions that define who we are as Episcopalians while living in this changing world. That is the way of the emergent church for us.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> We 21<sup>st</sup> century followers of Jesus the Christ do not live in constant persecution, but there is always pressure and risk to being a Christian. This summer three Episcopal churches have burned, St. James in Eureka Springs, Arkansas (June 26<sup>th</sup>), Church of the Messiah in Central Islip, New York (June 18), and St. Stephen's in Douglas, Arizona (May 22). And two of our churches have been vandalized in the Diocese of Western New York and Washington, DC. We two have suffered destruction of property right here at St. Andrew's By-the-Sea. And let us not forget those who have been killed – targeted – in other churches and our own Episcopal Church outside Birmingham. Surely it is not because we and the other churches are spreading the good news of the love of God and Jesus's saving grace.

<sup>2</sup> Jim and I both attended the Episcopal Seminary of the SouthWest, now named Seminary of the Southwest.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Dylan, © 1963, Warner Brothers, Inc. Dylan's cover of *The Byrds* folk protest hymn from their album *Turn, Turn, Turn* garnered more attention than their group.

<sup>4</sup> I attended *Start Up-Start Over* in South Carolina some time ago.

<sup>5</sup> *The Gathering* in Houston, Texas, was a 3 day conference with Brian McLaren along with Jon Meacham, and other dynamic speakers.

<sup>6</sup> "Changing the Conversation: Nurturing a Third Way for Congregations" © 2007, Robinson, distributed by the Alban Institute, [www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=9628](http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=9628).