

My favorite song in our hymnal is a new one. [sing] My life flows on, in endless song, above earth's lamentation. I catch the sweet, though far off hymn that hails a new creation."

It's a song that can be sung at funerals and baby dedications, retirement parties and graduation parties... and it didn't exist in my grandfather's hymnal. It's new to the Brethren.

"No storm can shake my in-most calm while to that Rock I'm clinging; since love is Lord of Heav'n and earth, how can I keep from singing?"

I was visiting with some of our older members this week and we were talking about what a wonderful Christmas Eve service we had this year. Then they told me about the old days ... how they remembered fifty years ago when on Christmas Eve services when they had to put up chairs in the aisles, and the choir sat on both sides of the chancel area, the balcony was completely full and before we took out the six pews to make this open space up front.

We marveled at how even with all that extra capacity the church used to be completely full for Christmas Eve service probably 300 people in this room.

Things have changed.

In my previous congregation in Pennsylvania they also remembered the heyday of their church 50 years ago. When 500 people came for Love Feast and every classroom was filled for footwashing. They ate their meal in the church pews equipped with little pop-up tables. And all the shops in town closed for Maundy Thursday.

Most of the members of their church board were also members of the town council. They would end their church council meeting and then gavel in the beginning of the town council meeting and nobody changed seats. Not even the pastor.

Things have changed.

Every year the Vienna town council invites me to open their meeting with prayer. I took this as a great honor until I read the letter more closely. Evidently the prayer cannot address God in certain ways, cannot end in Jesus' name, and cannot include anything that might influence council decisions. Really now! What in the world would I say and why in the world I would say it. And who would I say it to. Can you imagine? Let us pray: "To whom it may concern. Please don't try to influence us in our decision-making. The end."

Things have changed

In the past the church had influence; today it seems to matter less. In the past they printed Sunday sermons on the front page of the New York Times; today we have to pay to run an ad. Back in those days nobody would think about having soccer or dance competitions on the Lord's Day [that's what we used to call it]. And Wednesday evenings were reserved for church functions.

Things have change. Things have *really* changed.

Dr. Phyllis Tickle in her book the *Great Emergence* explains how every 500 years the church goes through a time of cataclysmic change. In the first century the church started in houses then catacombs. In the fifth century came the doctrinal counsels and the Fall of Rome. And without Rome to govern everybody the church took over. Around 1,000 AD came the great split between eastern and western Christianity. We even had two Popes for a while. Tremendous changes and devastating loss.

In the 1500s came the protestant revolution [or "reformation" depending on whether you were catholic or protestant] ---a change that ripped the church and even countries apart including the 30-years war which decimated Germany. And here we are now, about 500 years later and people are calling this the end of Christendom ... the end of the age when Christianity was in charge.

We as a church have spent the past 50 years denying that, but if you look at the membership and attendance records or see how the church is reflected in media and print, we see that change in almost

all denominations in Europe and Northern America. It is impossible to ignore. The church of old is dead. Or if you're not willing to go that far at the very least we have to admit that it's on life support and not long for this world.

I turned 52 this week. And if you talk to people my age and older they will tell you that the church of their childhood is no longer possible. I think of it this way: the church I was trained to serve has vanished. The way I was trained in seminary and the church I grew up in cannot be found in today's world.

The things we hung our hopes on in the past simply do not relate to today's people. The four spiritual laws; phrases like being washed in the blood; hymns like "Onward Christian Soldiers"; substitutional atonement and radical pietism; and even our precious footwashing and Lovefeast have lost their ability to connect with people as they did in the old days.

The world simply looks at the church differently than it did; we are seen with suspicion and, sometimes, cynicism. And the church has done some things to deserve this cynicism. I watched at the post office this year as one man berated a postal employee for saying Happy Holiday instead of Merry Christmas! Ah! Yes. There's the witness of Jesus in the public square! [sarcasm]

We no longer matter in many, many people's lives. And we've done some things to cause people to distrust us. And it's changed the way the church is seen here and there.

Let me give you an example of one change just in the past 20 years.

It used to be that as a pastor I could walk into the hospital, enter an area reserved for staff, pick up a folder that had a list of every patient in the hospital, find their room numbers, religious affiliation, age, and location (maternity, oncology, post-op, ICU) and go visit them.

Nowadays I sometimes won't even get a call from the patient telling me they are in the hospital and Lord help me get info from the ER!

Things have changed.

And I have to be honest with you: sometimes that gets me a little discouraged. I remember the days when church attendance was more important than sports. I remember the days when people would believe what I said from the pulpit simply because it was the Word of God and I was speaking from a pulpit! I remember a day when people went to church like they stopped at stop signs --- everyone did it!

Things have changed. And sometimes that makes us quite sad.

But then I remember that change itself is not all bad.

Phyllis Tickle writes that these times of radical change and loss are also times of tremendous new creativity and insight. She says it is like moving from one house to another; we get to go through our closets and sort out the things we will take to the new place and things we can leave behind.

That old practice of wearing prayer bonnets to prove our piety and to stop the menfolk from having inappropriate attractions --- we can let that go.

The belief that only men could serve in the pulpit and only women in the kitchen --- that has been put to rest.

A deep appreciation for searching the scriptures for the meaning and motives of God, however, is worth taking with us. Reading and praying our way through life in order to become more familiar with how God acts and what God wants and how God sounds is something we need to take out of the closet and polish up a bit.

And when we rediscover those treasures in the closet ... treasures of faith covered up by the junk we've accumulated in the past 500 years since our last move, we can lay hold of this treasure in new ways.

Do you see what's going on? It's really ONLY when we start letting go of the thing that's dying that we can really take hold of the thing that's trying to be born.

Heavens to Betsy! [Maybe that's one of those old things we can let go of.] ... err. OMG, We've actually got a word for letting-go-of-the-

thing-that's-dying so we can take hold of the thing that's being born. In Christianity specialize in it. It's called resurrection.

If the church is going to be the church in this new world then it's going to have to stop being satisfied with resuscitations and start laying claim to the resurrection.

You know the difference, right? Resuscitation simply brings the same old body back again. Resurrection gives us a new body, a new hope, a new life. It makes all the difference in the world!

When I was a hospital chaplain I often worked on-call at night. When the Emergency Room had a critical patient the doctor was paged, the nurses were paged, and the chaplain was paged.

When an elderly person was brought in without a pulse the doctors were required to do everything in their power to bring that person back to life --- to resuscitate them.

I would be with them as they began ... I know it seems astonishing nowadays but I was allowed to hold the person's hand and pray for them as the nurses got busy. Then I would go sit with the family in the waiting area.... a private room for fatalities. It was in this room that the family would hear whether their grandmother would live or die that night.

I would sit with them, listen to them, pray with them and I would hear, from them, of their 95-year-old grandmother's strong faith, her desire to be released into the life that awaited her after death, a return to the side of her husband long since deceased, a release from the suffering of her chronic heart disease, or cancer, or painful bone disease. And all the while I could hear in the other room the thump, thump, thump, of the machine that was trying to resuscitate her.

As I sat with the family, praying with them, I heard the thumping start and I heard when it stopped. And I knew that one way or another we would be visited soon by the doctor. Either they will have resuscitated grandmother back into the world of her 95-year-old, pain-filled dying. Or they will have "lost" her to God's resurrecting love and new life.

Which, do you think, was the more blessed outcome?

Do you see? When you have faith ...faith in a God who “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or [even] think”, ....faith that a so-so resurrection is still better than an excellent resuscitation ... well, that’s a game-changer.

Sometimes, you see, the old must die if the new is to spring forth.

We read that In the Gospel of John this morning. The people came with a request to see Jesus and Jesus says, “Great! Right on Schedule. It is time for me to die.”

How did he say it? Remember? “

John 12:21 “They came to Philip, ... and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

[And] Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a [seed] falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life [or don't set their life as their utmost priority] in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

That’s how he said it: “Now is the hour for the Son of Man (that’s Jesus) to be glorified (that means crucified ... lifted up ... on a cross).” Because when he died to himself, he set creation right with God. In his death real life was given...from God.

And then Jesus adds this little gem: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

I know this seems counter-intuitive. But the harder we try to resuscitate a dying shell, the further we keep ourselves from the new life that’s promised. It’s that way for grains of wheat. It’s that way for mortal bodies aged beyond their time. And it’s that way with churches.

We don't have 300 people at Christmas Eve; we don't have 500 people at Love Feast; and the church isn't what it used to be. But that's not all bad.

Brothers and Sisters something new awaits us. Because even, and especially, when the church is no longer what it used to be, God is. And the thing that's left when structures and doctrines and practices and abundance are gone is actually the only thing that we were really looking for in the first place: God, the Divine.

Listen: It is possible to stand in a full church with an empty soul and it is possible to stand in an empty church with a full soul ... and 500 years from now one of those things will matter more than the other.

Our calling as people of faith is to build disciples not churches and one of the exciting things happening with this seismic shift going on in this current 500-year transformation cycle is a deep and serious dialogue about what the new emerging church should look like.

What's the REM (rock) song? "It's the end of the world as we know it; and I feel fine!" Because the new faith is less triumphant and more humble; less controlling and more serving; less politically manipulative and more simply Christ-like; less driven to success in the eyes of the world and more driven to faithfulness in the eyes of God. Like Paul said in the reading this morning:

"To come not with lofty words or wisdom but knowing only Jesus Christ, and him crucified... so that faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God."

The new seed growing out of the old shell is like this and even though we can focus on all that we're losing as the power and prestige of Christendom dies we would be better served to lay hold of what God is birthing among us. "Behold," says God, "I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?"

I've been doing a lot of reading about this new emerging church---the "new thing" I was not trained to lead. And one of the things that really surprises me is how the people who are most invested in this new Christianity are falling in love with the Anabaptists. Brian

McLeron, Greg Boyd, Phyllis Tickle ... the big names in the emerging church are pointing to the Brethren and the Mennonites and saying: "Hey! These people are on to something."

At Annual Conference a few years ago, Phyllis Tickle said that if she wasn't already Episcopalian she'd be Brethren [with the hope of following Jesus Peacefully, simply, together.]

And this congregation --- Oakton Church of the Brethren --- you've got this sense of openness to change in your blood.

My first meeting with the deacons here almost ten years ago we were talking about Love Feast. Bob Seidel was chair then and asked me to plan the Love Feast to which I said I would rather the deacons plan it so I could see what traditions were important to the Oakton Church.

Bob said something to the effect: "We don't have to stick with what we usually do. We're ready to do whatever you want!"

That's it right there! The spirit of the past giving way to an unknown future with faith. Now, it's true that I've since learned that not all new suggestions are welcomed with such open arms [we're not crazy]... but the vast majority are and that has been taught to us by our elders here. We can be that church, unconfined by the past, embracing and engaging what God is doing in there here and now.

Look: There's nothing inherently wrong with the old. Remember that "new hymn" I love so much? "No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging?" It was written in the late 1800s.

The issue is how we re-new the old while we lay hold of God's new thing.

We can be that church: unconfined by the past and embracing and engaging God's unfolding future. We are that church: with a baby dedication and leadership retirements on the same Sunday. We are people who don't demand compliance but invite conversation. We are a family that loves each family member even the crazy ones (like the pastor). We strive for faithfulness within ourselves more than in



the worlds of others. We come to worship God instead of church.  
We're a voice preaching Christ, and him crucified --- a promise of  
resurrection instead of resuscitation.

Because if we're going to be partners with God in this new thing God  
is doing we will be an institution with a hundred year history and a  
people with a hundred-minute memory.

Living a life that flows on in endless song above earth's lamentation.