

**THE SAME YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER**  
**Can Organized Religion Adapt to Change?**

Sermon Preached by  
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Scripture: Luke 18:1-8; Hebrews 13:3-13

“Can organized religion adapt to change?” That’s the question posed by the committee for this summer preaching series this year. Of course it’s a loaded phrase, that question, loaded by the two words “organized” and “religion”, which is enough to turn away anyone under the age of 40 as an irrelevant topic, dated, out of touch with the real world, and of no importance to them. Rick Spalding and I were talking about this series of sermons this summer and we decided that Barbara Wheeler won the prize for the best sermon title: “Organized? Religion?”

It was Will Rogers who said, “I’m not a member of any organized political party, I’m a Democrat.” And today most young adults, in fact many Baby Boomers, have grown up questioning the authenticity and authority of organized religion.

We might add that the thing that most characterizes the contemporary Protestant church of today is not its organization but its disintegration, declining numbers, diminishing foreign missions, and waning influence. Whether it be Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians or Unitarians, even Roman Catholics (if you discount immigrant numbers) every major religious community in this country is declining.

I belong to a clergy conversation group in Manhattan that includes three Muslim imams, and even they are saying that the number of young adults who are mosque worshippers is dwindling. Similarly, one prominent rabbi in New York City said of his congregation, “the synagogue for our youth is like ‘your grandfather’s Oldsmobile.’”

For Protestants, Sunday worship attendance is down, trust of denominational leadership is at an all time low. Presbyteries are fractured. And churches all around the country are using the words “graceful departure” to describe their desire to leave the denomination. Our presbyteries around the country hardly know how to manage this, and financial support in presbyteries across the nation is in such decline that staffing and salaries have been cut and the functions of the stated clerk and presbytery executive are being combined if not eliminated on a salaried basis.

“Organized religion” is out of favor these days, especially among younger adults. What is valued is the more spontaneous, the contemporary, that which is embedded in pop culture and music, and the more relaxed and informal the religious expression, the more attractive that expression is.

Churches around the country are experimenting with forms and styles that are not traditional. It's not uncommon to find a kind of living room setting of lounge chairs and sofas where worship takes place and music does not require hymnbooks but PowerPoint slides projected on a screen.

We are long past guitars and folk music as avant guard. The style is relational, the mood relaxed, the appearance of the place where worship happens is casual and informal. Music is eclectic and may involve a jazz combo, a band of rock musicians, a piano player who provides ambient improvisation while the prayers are being said. Or maybe the service is a blending of classical and contemporary music alternating between *Ave Maria* and a Taize chant. Free spirited is the word that comes to mind. "Organized" religion, but organized for the spontaneous, the unexpected, the spiritual (whatever that means) but not necessarily the religious per se if religious is synonymous with classical and formal and structured.

The director of family music ministries at my church just took a full-time position at a church that she founded. She was awarded a grant by the Lutheran Church (ELCA) to develop the ministry that she began in Brooklyn called St. Lydia's. It's a church of mostly young adults who gather on Sunday evenings for a common meal, are seated at tables when they gather, and who worship around the food that they have prepared or brought. And each week that meal leads to a celebration of the Eucharist. There is singing, there is scripture, and there is a sermon though it is informally presented, more like a conversation, and then the bread and wine are lifted up and consecrated, and people share in the unity of their oneness in Christ.

But there are no pipe or electric organs, no pews, no vestments, no hymnals, none of the trappings of traditional church life. Just an emphasis on the people who are there and the ties that bind their lives in a Christian seeking and finding that is meaningful to them.

I'm reminded of the early days of Christianity when the first of the disciples had been worshipping in the synagogue and the Gentile converts came and they found that they were not welcome. So those early Christians began meeting in house churches in homes and catacombs, any place where they felt they could be safe and still break bread and hear the scriptures, and be together in the new life that they were creating together.

Lots of churches these days are opting for rock music and PowerPoint illustrations and pastors with Hawaiian shirts, and I predict that that look and style will likely be very recognizable and datable in the history books on this period in American religious life somewhere ages and ages hence, at least as recognizable as the beehive hairstyle on women in the 1950's and early 60's. As much as tattoos will likely identify the age of the elderly sixty years from now in comparison to the un-inked skins of the then-20-somethings who will find their grandparents' body decorations and piercings (if they still have them) as odd footnotes on a freer time in American history. Nothing changes so much as change.

So what worries me is not so much the ability of the church to adapt to changing styles of worship and spirituality. I see evidence that the church is doing that in many ways already.

What concerns me is the growing number of people who identify as "nones", not as members of a Roman Catholic religious order, not that kind of nun, but the growing number of people who were sampled in a recent Pew poll on religion in America who marked their religious preference as "none." They are the "nones" that I am talking about, and they are a growing number.

We used to call them “the unchurched,” which made them sound a little zombie-like, as if they hadn’t swallowed the Kool-Aid or gotten their indoctrination yet. But in reality these are more the people who have looked at the church and rejected it, or want nothing to do with it. They are folks whose parents questioned authority, all organizational authority and found it lacking, so they have never been in church, never known church school, never worshipped in a church on a Sunday morning.

They are also many young people who have seen how the church is still talking about gay people and gay marriage and are all hung up on it, when they themselves resolved that issue long ago and moved on. If the church is still talking about that, then especially those who are young adults assume there is nothing much in the church that is relevant to their life since that matter is a no brainer to them and the church is still stuck there fighting a battle that when we are all finally past it will look a lot like the old film clips of George Wallace and Bull Connor and Strom Thurmond defending segregation.

Young adults in the church are changing what they expect of worship and what they need. They are coming for community, for roots, for spirituality yes, but not for doctrinaire Christianity, and certainly not exclusively for Presbyterianism.

If any of those things become a part of their experience in the church community it’s a bonus. But like many churches in New York City and other urban centers, my congregation has experienced a growth in the number of young adults who attend worship, have their children baptized, and join the church itself. This is counter to the denominational trends, the church in the larger more suburban and rural settings of the country. And we are not a church that has a blended worship service or a finger on the pulse of pop culture.

Interestingly enough, it is great sport today to analyze, explain, quantify, and interpret the decline of mainline church attendance. Dorothy Butler Bass, Robert Putnam, Phyllis Tickle, and Harvey Cox among others have the answers for us. They try to explain the decline of the mainline church, and even the evangelical church today which is also experiencing losses in numbers.

Maybe we are, as Phyllis Tickle says, going through a cycle that we see every 500 years in the church. Maybe we are, as Putnam suggests, suffering the inevitable outcome of the shock of the 1960’s. Maybe Harvey Cox is right and we are in the third period of a three-era change that has been unfolding over time: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and now the Age of the Spirit.

But one thing we should remember as we explain the change that is taking place around us in the culture and in the church and that is that decline in church attendance and identification with congregational life has happened before. I’m grateful to Barbara Wheeler for pointing out that William McLaughlin argues in his book *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, that American church life is cyclical, it waxes and wanes around periods of revival and awakening.

Historian Timothy Smith challenged McLaughlin, believing that there was a constant amount of evangelical energy in all periods of American history. Sometimes it surged, sometimes it was submerged, but it never went away.

Regardless of whether you take McLaughlin’s revivalist-awakening view, or Smith’s constant perspective, we cannot ignore the fact that we are in a time of decline in the mainline church, in which

if something does not change there will be continuing disintegration of the Christian church and even religious life altogether.

It has been worse than this before. The late Robert Handy, Union Seminary's eminent church historian, described the period between 1925 and 1935 as the lowest point in church life in American history.<sup>1</sup>

There are reasons for this. People were disillusioned by the horror that they had seen in World War I. The economic depression raised doubts about our self understanding and about the prosperity associated with God's blessing. There was a breakdown of confidence in moral and ethical respect for the great Protestant industrial scions of that era. The emergence of modernism built on the backdrop of a scientific worldview that offered new explanations to understand life, like Darwinism challenging the beliefs of biblical fundamentalism. People became disillusioned with the church and Handy calls it "that bleak period." But it was followed in the 1950's by the largest surge in church attendance, growth, and expansion in modern American history.

Some might say that we are in a bleak period now as well. But I would like to suggest that we are simply in the midst of the woods on a trail where the blue blazes on the trees are not as well marked as they once were. Yes, there is denominational decline, and diminishing attendance in worship, and fracturing in our denominations. The modernist-fundamentalist debate has morphed into its next stage which is really a continuation of the debate about whether science and culture and church can co-exist, and in what ways? We are asking fresh questions about authority in the church, and how do we determine what is truth? It is a dense forest and it is hard to see where the trail is leading.

But that is our work in the church today, to be the church in an in-between era. A time for slowing down and making sense, as well as for making ready for a new weaving of life and of the church. We are not so much in a time of bleak despair watching the sun set on the church, unable to change, but rather sorting out what we have been carrying for a long time and deciding what is essential, what we will take with us, and what no longer speaks as effectively.

We are considering the discoveries of science and medicine and technology and the impact of social networking and a new globalism and the breaking down of old structures that we see in the Middle East and in Asia, the building of a world community and the interplay between world religions. There is a great deal of movement and change, implosion and explosion, and we have not yet discovered in the church how to adapt to such rapid change.

In the meantime, some very important things have been happening outside of the church, which have made the church never more needed than in the years ahead. The vast explosion of knowledge and information, for instance, has made us hungry for *wisdom*.

The constantly changing culture has made us eager to develop *roots*.

The fascination with the novel and the concomitant loss of history in our lives has made us long for *context*.

The scientific and technological overload that washes over us has made us lonely for *meaning*.

The excess of facts has made us yearn from *mystery*.

I think the time is already upon us when the change that is required of the church is to open more accessibly the doors of a church which can offer to a rising generation of meaning seeking adults and children the meaning that they are seeking. And this is not so much a matter of writing more contemporary hymns for use with synthesizers and guitars. It's not necessarily streaming worship services live on the web. Nor is it adopting the world's values and culture and meanings. I suspect that eventually the materialism and narcissism and superficiality of the next thing that our culture so craves will be exposed for the vapid nature of its being.

In fact, I wonder if perhaps the church is about to be *rediscovered*. The meanings and values and truths that the scriptures uphold newly treasured, and the community of believers who are the church may be re-discovered to embody what is most desirable and necessary for a good life.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews in reassuring that community of early Christians said, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." And exactly what he meant and in what context he said it is somewhat lost to us, though many in the church have used this text as a defense to reject Biblical textual criticism, to gold leaf an unbending theological conservatism, and to guard against any lively conversation between human understanding and historical context as it shapes and influences how we interpret our faith.

What I would say is that the church is called to be faithful in this time of transition and to stand ready for a new weaving. The church is called to do what it has always done when it is most faithful: to worship God with thanksgiving and praise, to witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed, to perform acts of healing and hospitality in the church and community, to pray without ceasing, to continue to study the scriptures with an open heart and an open mind, to keep its rooms ready for guests who may not stay long but who need to come for respite from time to time, to be gracious in its welcome, to sort out what is essential from what is urgent, while doing what is necessary, to build a community that is so closely knit that they bear one another's burdens and rejoice in one another's rejoicing, never allowing that closeness to prevent anyone from joining in and becoming a part of that community.

That is, practically speaking what I think it is to bear witness to the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

The parable that we read today from Luke's gospel is a parable about being persistent in prayer, but it is also a clue as to what the church's role in difficult times should be.

It should be faithful. It is to bear witness to a God whose very nature is faithfulness, so that when the Son of Man comes again, he will find not only faith on Earth, but also those who embody faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert T. Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935. Church History, Vol. 29, No. 1 (March, 1960) 14. Cambridge University Press on behalf of the American Society of Church History.