

Last week at The Vital Church conference in Salt Lake City, Jean and I presented your story to mainline church leaders from all over the country. We were asked to do that because without knowing it, you have all been on the cutting edge of what is being termed the emerging church movement.

The plenary session speaker for this conference was Diana Butler Bass. Diana is a church historian. Her job was to put into historical context for us what is happening at St. David's and churches like us around the country. She did an amazing job. Diana is very good at analyzing the past and articulating what has occurred across church history. But I believe her greatest talent is her ability to understand and evaluate what is happening in the church right now. I learned much from her during our time together. I wish I could just pass all that knowledge right on to you this morning, but it took even the brilliant Diana three days to build the framework around her central point.

But I do want to tell you one story that she shared with us, because I think it is a great entree into today's readings, and why these readings are so important to you and me in the 21st century world.

Her story came from her friend Phyllis Tickle, who also happens to be writing these days about the amazing changes that are taking place in Christianity. Phyllis tells the story of her visit to the Episcopal Cathedral in Atlanta. The Cathedral of St. Philip is a gigantic gothic space, very reminiscent of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Phyllis was having a forum there and over a thousand people were

gathered in the sanctuary to hear her. The huge majority of that audience were, let us say, seasoned adults, 50 years old and over. However, back in the narthex there was a band of teenagers, who had volunteered their time to prepare food and feed the masses who had gathered for the forum.

As it happens that day, a gentleman on this side of the cathedral stands up and asks Phyllis a question about the virgin birth. In typical litmus test fashion, he wants to know if Phyllis believes that Mary conceived Jesus without ever having “known a man”, in the biblical sense of that phrase. Phyllis does not immediately respond, purposely creating a pregnant pause, so to speak, before saying anything. And then another person on the opposite side of the cathedral stands up and says, “Of course, it is not literally true. Don’t be ridiculous.” Another person then stands up saying if it is not true, Christianity is a scam. And then another follows saying that it was only when they accepted the Christmas story as a metaphor that they could have come to faith. Then the whole place erupted into this battle between people who argued that it must be literally true and people saying it can’t be literally true.

Now in the midst of this, Phyllis stands there, not saying a word. But she watches as one of those teenagers gathered in the narthex starts making his way up the center aisle of the cathedral, listening to this volley of attacks going back and forth among the adults. Phyllis ends the forum right then, with some non-committal statement about the issue at hand. Then she says, “If you want to discuss this further, come on up and we will do it individually.” Well, many come forward, and as Phyllis watches the line form, she notices that the teenager who had stood there watching the

battle, has quietly slipped into that line. And Phyllis says to herself, “I really want to know what he is thinking about all this. So as quickly as compassionately possible, Phyllis deals with the questions of the folks in front of the teenager. Finally she gets him up there and he says this to her. “Ms. Tickle, you need to explain this to me. I just don’t understand what the adults are arguing about.” And then he said this; “The story of the virgin birth is so beautiful that it has to be true, whether it ever happened or not.”

“The story of the virgin birth is so beautiful that it has to be true, whether it ever happened or not.” It is that sentence that captures so well what is going on in today’s church. For the adults in the church, the issue is about historical accuracy. Did the birth occur without sexual intercourse or not? They are living in the world of order and reason as described in the words on the top of the sheet you have. But for the teenager, the idea of a single, one answer truth makes no sense. He is living in the world of the words at the bottom of your sheet. Multiplicity, adapt, pluralism. For him, beauty is truth, a much more important truth than historical accuracy. Because in a post-modern mindset, there are multiple ways of understanding everything in the world, there cannot be only one truth. This teenager chose to see this truth through the lens of beauty and it shifted the very ground underneath that cathedral.

I am not suggesting that this is an age thing. There are plenty of teenagers who choose the modern concept of a single authority and a black and white understanding or religious concepts because post-modernist thinking is just too confusing and unsettling. And there are plenty of 70, 80 and 90 year olds who have embraced post-modernity completely. One of them is Phyllis Tickle. Another is our own Frances

Cline. The important thing is that we realize what is going on here so we can participate in the conversation, and it all begins with the realization that we are not living in the world of the Enlightenment any more. The way that I learned to think and understand the relationship between myself and the world is changing. In this transitional period between the hard and fast rules of modernity and the multi-faceted thought processes of post-modernity, the basis of our discussions is completely changing.

It is also interesting that many people, including much of our national media, do not have a clue that our conversation has changed. While much of the media is still doing this point/counterpoint thing, lining up liberals vs. conservatives, republicans vs. democrats, that is not where the real issues are going to reside. No one will care about gay marriage as a church issue 100 years from now, not because people will become more liberal than conservative, but because from a post-modern perspective, such an issue makes no sense. Of course there are multiple ways to view marriage a post-modernist says, how could it all be only one way.

This is so exciting on so many levels, but what immediately comes to mind for me is that we now have a pathway out of this silly polarization that has divided the church right in half for the past 100 years. By framing our religious questions in the realities of things like beauty and love, we can all begin to hear the heart of the Gospel and stop wasting time arguing about whether something literally happened or not. The tenets at the heart of Christianity are so beautiful that they have to be true, whether they ever happened or not.

One more story, this one my own. A few years ago I was talking to Jean's daughter Barb. Barb is a brilliant woman who married a man from the deep south who was steeped in the religious traditions of fundamentalism. Barb embraced that tradition fully and completely. When Barb was a teenager, before she ever met her husband-to-be, she dated a Jewish boy, a nice guy that I and her mother liked very much. I said to Barb a few years ago, you know, if you had married Bill, by circumstance you would have embraced Judaism fully and completely and become one of the great Jewish mothers ever. She was immediately incensed. How dare I suggest that just by circumstance she would have rejected the one true faith and not accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. "That," she said, "would not, could not, have happened. There is only one path to God and that's why God led me in the direction He did," she told me in no uncertain terms.

Well, this past week, Jean was talking to Barb, and she learned that Barb was communicating with many of her old friends on Facebook. One of those friends was Bill. Then Jean said, well you know, if you had married him, you would probably have been celebrating Passover last week. And Barb did not protest a bit. She, in fact, seemed to accept that this could have happened.

Now this may not sound like much to you, but there is a huge shift taking place here. Some of the most hard lined progressive and conservative Christians are now seeing things in a different light. They are seeing not one way, not my way or the highway, but rather multiple possibilities based on circumstances. They are praying and discerning these multiple sets of data and making new determinations on where

they believe God is leading them. On the national front, we are seeing this from leaders like Rick Warren, the evangelical leader who delivered the invocation at the Presidential inauguration. You may have noticed that he has recently been under fire from people he thought were his religious colleagues because he said that he is not anti-gay marriage.

Rick Warren is not going back on his principles or suddenly siding with the liberals. He is a post-modern thinker who is seeing the world through a wholly new set of principles.

The worldview of postmodernism is here and just like every change in worldview over the centuries, it will present us with all kinds of new challenges and difficulties. Those challenges may be too much for many to bear, and so they will choose to remain within a modern understanding of how the world operates.

But postmodernism is also going to present us with what I believe to be not only the greatest spiritual opportunity of our lifetime, but the greatest opportunity in the last 500 years. It is going to place our Biblical and religious precepts under a wholly new light and change the very core of the argument that has been going on in our pews and among Christian churches. Because in a post-modern way of thinking, the idea that our religious calling is all about figuring out which tradition offers “the one and only true path to God” makes absolutely no sense. Instead, the words that jump out for us from today’s Gospel are these from Jesus. “You did not choose me but I chose you.” From a post-modern perspective, religion is not about us finding God in the one church that houses God. It is the fact that God chooses us, that God loves us so much that God

seeks us out and finds us no matter where we are.

It is about hearing the words from Acts today and realizing that the Holy Spirit does not care which Creedal statement we profess. Instead, we hear, the gift of the Holy Spirit is received by everyone, even...the Gentiles. Who are we then, to deny baptism or communion, for that matter, to anyone? It is about hearing the words of today's Psalm and realizing that God never had one just chosen group of people. All of us are chosen by God. God's presence was never limited to just Jews, they just thought it was. God's presence was never just limited to Christians, we just thought it was. It is not limited to Jews or Gentiles or progressives or conservatives or Mormons or Baptists. The marvelous things that God has done are in fact, not even limited to people our Psalm tells us today. God has revealed his vindication, we hear, to ALL of the nations and not only that, but to ALL of the earth. It is not just we who are called to celebrate and be joyful about this, but all of Creation.

In the light of post-modernism, we can hear today's Gospel and realize that faith cannot be about believing in a doctrine about God, but rather is all about abiding in God's love, a love that fills us with the joy and celebration of Psalm 98. In this new worldview, we hear today's Gospel and understand faith not doctrinally, but rather as a call into relationship, a call to abide in God's love and then spread that love to one another and to all of the world. Through a post modern mindset, we can begin to see the folly of the Trinitarian controversies and our arguments over virgin births and whether the Son proceeded from the Father. Instead, we realize that our trinitarian understanding of God is just as Jesus describes it in today's Gospel. "As the Father

has loved me, so have I loved you.” If God is in a relationship with God, then the essence of faith must be that we are in relationship with each other, bearing God’s fruit to all of the world.

Beloved, the choice is ours. We can choose to stay in the modern worldview and continue to debate faith issues as the media would have us do it, arguing from conservative and liberal perspectives. We can keep fighting about virgin births and gay marriage and separating ourselves based on our dogmatic and creedal beliefs about God. Or...or we can embrace the post-modern worldview of multiple truths and break down all the barriers that have separated us from one another. We can begin to understand the Biblical meanings that have been hidden from us for the last 500 years as we tried to reason the Gospel to death. We can live into today’s Gospel and together abide in God’s overwhelming love.

Beloved, this is the opportunity of the millennia. And lucky us, we are alive to live it. You and I can change the heart and soul of Christianity and the heart and soul of all religion. We can change the very ground underneath us and move religious discourse from a fight about single truth to a realization that our faith is all about beauty, the beauty of a world that is saturated with God’s love and presence, the beauty of abiding in God’s love, the beauty of a God who lives in relationship with God and with all of us. Let us embrace each other and all of God’s creation and live into the beauty of our Gospel and the beauty of our God. Amen.