

“The Church is Not an Accident”

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Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11

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One of the highlights of a meal at a Chinese restaurant is the fortune cookie. Now the cookie itself isn't all that much of a treat. I mean, it pales in comparison to Scottish shortbread or a chocolate Frango. It is the fortune inside that is fun, the little scrap of paper that pretends to read the future. “Today you will meet a friendly stranger,” or “Do not spend money on a car today” are the types of forecast you can expect to find in a fortune cookie.

Now I don't know of anyone who takes the fortunes from fortune cookies very seriously. Even so, human beings have sought ways to predict the future ever since time began. If only one could know the future, one would know how to live today. Kings in antiquity traveled to the Oracle of Delphi in order to know if they should go to war or not. I don't know what the success rate of the dear oracle was, but legends abound over the mistaken interpretations of the oracle's pronouncements. The future is just plain elusive, always has been and still is. That doesn't stop people who persist in attempts to know what the future holds. People today try to predict the weather, especially storms. Researchers study ways to predict disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Financial wizards try to forecast how to invest present monies for tomorrow's economy. Military advisors, somewhat parallel to the ancient oracle, try to strategize to meet political goals in times of conflict.

The two Scripture lessons that we have today show us a church in a very uneasy place. The future is not known. If only it could be! Jesus has begun a new movement, but now he is about to leave his followers and the new movement will be left in their questionably capable hands. How, exactly, are they to continue to bring the ministry of Jesus into the world without Jesus by their side?

On the night before the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, Jesus prays for the disciples. He says that God has sent him, and has given him the words and the abilities needed to do God's work. Now he has passed along these words and abilities so that the disciples may continue the work of God. “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you,” he prays to God.

The disciples are very uneasy. What does this mean for them? Are they to leave their homes and jobs and families? Are they to take on the powerful religious authorities as Jesus has done? That is not a task to take on lightly! There are horribly serious consequences for locking horns with the power brokers of Jerusalem, crucifixion for one. And just how are they to return to their neighborhood synagogues and their familiar Jewish rituals after Jesus has impacted their lives? It will not be the same, and it cannot be the same. Should they just quietly quit participating in religious life? No, that

can't be right, either. Their spiritual awareness has been brought to a whole new threshold with Jesus. What exactly is ahead for them? How is faithfulness going to look in this new movement? Will this new movement be able to survive? Will it even last a year without Jesus physically present?

Then, in the beginning of the book of Acts, the risen Jesus has returned to this frightened bunch. Oh good, they think. Now all of this is out of our hands and back in the hands of Jesus! They ask Jesus if the kingdom of Israel will be restored at this time. That is the only positive future they understand. A king like David will sit on the throne of an independently governed Israel, and all will be well for them.

Once again, Jesus shakes up all of their understandings and assumptions. His answer is along the lines of, "Who cares? That doesn't matter. God will handle that. The point for you is, the Holy Spirit is coming to you, and because of the presence of the Holy Spirit with you, you will be my witnesses here, there, and everywhere throughout the earth!"

And before they can ask a thousand questions about what exactly that means for them, Jesus ascends into heaven. Again, he is gone, and they are left with a very uncertain future ahead of them.

The Christian Church in 2008 is in a parallel situation to that early fledgling church in very many ways. Just how are we to call ourselves "Christian" in an age when organized religion is seen as an irrelevant antique? Just exactly how are we to bear the work and word of Jesus Christ to a world that thinks all that religious stuff is a burden upon humankind, an "opiate to the people"?

For most of the last century, churches such as ours enjoyed a degree of prestige in our land. Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, Congregational churches, and more were a Protestant bastion in American society called "Mainline Christianity." When churches such as ours spoke, they spoke from an authoritative stance, from a position of power and widespread support. Lots of Americans poured in the doors to worship as Mainline Protestants. It was what good Americans did.

But now the Mainline churches are referred to by some as "Sidelined." Our voice is largely ignored and replaced by that of the Religious Right and fundamentalism in political and social circles. People don't see the importance of carving time out of their already overloaded schedules to participate in an institutional church. They prefer to worship God all on their own. Or perhaps they attend churches that are more black and white and absolute in their worldview, that dish out answers to people rather than nurture an ability to listen to the subtleties in prayer of the Holy Spirit at work in the world. Some people cobble together bits and pieces of whatever seems attractive from the major world religions, and put together their own spiritual guideposts. Or, they give up entirely on religion, seeing it all as a waste of time, resources, and effort.

Declining numbers of membership in all of the Mainline churches speak loud and clear to this new cultural landscape, and there is much uneasiness and angst among Mainliners as to what is ahead. Will the Mainline churches be around in another 50 years in the future? If so, what will they be like? Obviously, whatever worked 50 years ago in the past – or 30, or even 20 – will not work for this new mindset and these new generations of Americans. The former prominence enjoyed by the Mainlines began their long slide into irrelevance for many people. Keeping everybody happy became more important than listening to the urgent whisperings of the Spirit. How much change is ahead for the Mainline churches, and how do they remain faithful to the work and witness of Jesus Christ without totally selling out to the Religious Right, as many churches have done? If only we could predict the future. If only we could get some assurance that whatever we do will be the successful and prosperous thing to do.

But those aren't the types of assurances that Jesus gives his followers. The disciples were left with questions and a host of unknowns as the beginning, newborn Church was placed into their shaky human hands.

What those first disciples did do was continue to gather together. They devoted themselves to prayer. They included everybody, especially the women, and they cultivated an openness to new things, sometimes with a bit of struggle, of course. They tried their best to model Jesus. They remembered that Jesus had prayed for them as a community, and if Jesus prayed for the well-being of the Church, there was even more reason for them to pray for the well-being of the Church! And they remembered that the Holy Spirit would be with them, just as Jesus had been with them.

So what does the future hold for the Mainline Presbyterian Church? There's the \$64,000 question. We don't know. But the Spirit is afoot! Something is ahead, something that is Spirit-filled and Christ-mannered. Bishop John Spong speaks of people he calls, "The Church Alumni Society," people who still love the Church, and want to be part of it, but don't quite see how it squares with life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you know, like how literally the Bible is to be taken, or wishing the Church could be more involved in different social justice movements. Marcus Borg sees something he calls "The Emerging Church," a sense among various scattered individuals that see Church as a vibrant community of faith that holds on to the goodness and beauty of tradition while being innovative at the same time and searching for a deeper quality of wisdom for a new era. Diana Butler Bass writes all about this in a book titled, "Christianity for the Rest of Us." Indeed, something is afoot, and the Spirit is moving in our midst.

Just like those first church leaders, we don't know what is ahead for the Church of Jesus Christ. We do know the old road maps for how to be Church aren't going to work. And, we know that the Church is not just an accident of history. God has very purposefully sent Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ has very purposefully revealed how to

live a God-directed and God-graced life. Now the Holy Spirit surrounds us, and Jesus prays over us and for us.

The Church is still not an accident of history. How is it to be Church in the coming days and years ahead? Well, wouldn't it be great to have a crystal ball to tell us these things? We don't know, at least not exactly. Those things are known by God, but are of no consequence to us, believe it or not. What we do know is that the Church is still a place where the Spirit of God leads us into new ways of being, into new horizons and into new areas of hope. Founded upon a tradition that has stood for two thousand years, and empowered by our prayer-filled gatherings and the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide and inform us, we can step into a cloudy future with grace and courage and joy. Amen!