

How the Jesus Movement has Changed

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

Near the end of last week's column, I wrote, "Perhaps today's church needs to recover the roots from which it sprang, rather than the business model which the church has adopted in the last few decades. It's time to rethink why Christians belong to a church."

I borrowed that notion of the church as a business from an interview with Richard Rohr. The interviewer asked Rohr about how the Jesus movement has changed over the centuries. He said something like this:

"The Jesus movement has changed since its earliest days. In the beginning, it began as an experience of God. It moved into the Greek world and became a philosophy. Then it moved into the world of Rome and Constantinople and became an organized religion. It spread into Europe and became a culture. Finally, it moved into North America, where it became a business."

Such broad descriptions are always a little exaggerated; nevertheless, despite the hyperbole, it rings true as a "big-picture overview" of how the Jesus movement has changed over the last two millennia. It began as a tiny group of people following a peripatetic rabbi who wandered around the countryside, teaching about a God who loves extravagantly, who welcomes everyone, who embraces the world with compassion and grace.

This itinerant rabbi Jesus criticized harshly both the existing religious institution of the day and the empire with which the religious leaders colluded. It was that partnership between religious and imperial leaders which executed Jesus. He was a threat to both entities. Religious leaders wanted to exercise control. Empire tried to impose its will over a stubborn and troublesome people in a small province far away from the centre of empire. The gospels all agree that religion and empire worked together to end the threat which Jesus posed, each for its own reasons.

It has always worked this way. Religion cozies up to power and ends up using the methods of empire to impose its own belief structure on others. It is happening today. Religious leaders are cozying up to political leaders in order to be near to power. In the USA, religious sycophants yearned for invitations to the White House by the former President. In Canada, they lined up for photo ops, especially when Prime Minister Harper welcomed the religious right as significant players in his government.

The problem, of course, is that the simple message of this itinerant rabbi gets lost amid the noise of politics and government. Religion gets coopted by empire for its own purposes.

The gospels are quite clear that a relationship like that just can't work. Luke's birth stories signal that only Jesus is Lord; we cannot call any earthly ruler "Lord." The angels announce to the poor shepherds, "Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Those titles—Saviour, Messiah, Lord, Prince of Peace—were the titles which Caesar used for himself. But Luke says that these titles belong to this child, who embraces all the world in peace, grace, and hope.

Even more bluntly, Mary sings a song of praise to God, who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly."

To use Rohr's analogy, when the Jesus movement became a philosophy, or an organized religion, or a culture, or a business, it forgot its roots in that announcement that there is only one who gives life, only one who serves all created beings, only one who brings life in abundance. None other can do that. Not earthly rulers. Not consumerism. Not the systems of power and

might in the world. Not religion as a business. Not the yearning for power embraced by so many religious leaders.

The Jesus movement fostered an experience of God in which we receive abundant life within the reign of God. The gospels call it “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven.” A new translation by Indigenous Christian scholars, called the First Nations Version, calls it “Creator’s good road.”

Repeatedly, Jesus invited people to walk in Creator’s good road, and experience God’s grace, peace, and love by walking in that way. When we walk in that good road, we ignore other pathways. Indeed, to walk in Creator’s good road is a criticism of any other road which people seek to build in the world through systems of power, influence, and militarism.

Sadly, the contemporary church regularly chooses to seek the ways of power and influence rather than the way of compassion and grace. It excludes people rather than welcoming all God’s beloved. It builds grand buildings and calls people to gather inside those buildings, rather than going out into the world to those places where people are already gathering.

The 2021 census data shows the results: organized religion means less and less to people today. We see it in church buildings which are mostly empty during the week, and where a few people huddle on a Sunday morning. We see it as larger numbers of people find the church to be unwelcoming, ungracious, and closed to new ways of thinking about contemporary issues.

Just as Jesus longed for his contemporaries to discover a fresh experience of God, perhaps it’s time for today’s church to rediscover our roots in the teachings of this itinerant rabbi and stop focussing on the “business” of church, so that it can once again become a community of peace, joy, grace, and welcome in the world, a community which seeks to live out life in all its fullness, a community of disciples who strive to walk Creator’s good road, a community which lives in the fullness of universal love.