

Sermon for Grace Ponca City, 8.19.18
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I've been reading about a theory put forward by an organizational consultant named David Hurst, who wrote a book called *Crisis & Renewal* about the life cycle of organizations.

He describes the life cycle of any organization as a sideways figure 8. Let's say you're Steve Jobs, and you have this idea for a computer that is so intuitive and beautiful and easy to use that you just know everyone will want one. So at that point you are starting at the left end of the sideways figure 8. But, let's say you call this thing an Apple. You know it's not just going to spring full-grown into being. Instead, you have the idea, and you have to gather a few people around you that believe in this idea, and you have to get organized, and you have to find financing, and an office, and a place to make these Apples. During that organizational period, you're moving downward along the curve toward the bottom of the 8.

Then, finally, you get everything put together, and you start making these Apples, and it's a slow uphill climb, but then finally it starts taking off, and it turns out a lot of people want these Apples, so you have to start building systems and an ever-more-organized organization, before you know it thing is huge. And you're moving up along the inside curve of the 8.

So you're going along, everything is great, and then something changes. It might be that the market gets saturated, it might be a change in leadership, it might be that the world changes. And you start leveling off and then declining, moving down until you're at the right-hand end of the 8.

And at that point you have two choices. You can let this thing go ahead and decline, just say it was good while it lasted, and let it go. Or you can start dreaming up new ideas, trying new things, working to figure out a new way of doing your mission that might look a little like the old way and a little like something completely new. Whatever you do, you want to hang onto your core identity: building electronic gadgets that are clean and beautiful and easy to use. But you also start trying all kinds of ideas, and maybe most of them don't work, but one day you have an idea for a new kind of phone, and you start building this phone, and all of a sudden everybody wants one, and you've changed the world. And you get organized around this new thing, which is like the old thing but transformed, and you get organized, and you start moving up a new uphill curve, and things are looking good ... until something else happens and it's time to rethink your market again.

All organizations, Hurst says, go through this life cycle, and whether they're an organization that is going to last depends on how they deal with those transition points: whether they see them as ending points, time to let go, or whether they see them as learning opportunities, times of transformation, challenges to let go of some old things and get inspired to do some new things. The organizations that are willing

to learn, grow, and be transformed – those are the ones that will last, and the life cycle will continue.

This idea applies to any kind of organization, I think – in fact it applies to human life. Which of us has not been through some kind of crisis or transition point when we have had to rethink who we are and what we are about? We get to college and we find that the thing we've planned to major in is something we don't enjoy doing, and we have to rethink our future. Or we have a health crisis, a change in a relationship, a new career opportunity, a transition point in life where we had to make big decisions and the way ahead was not clear.

At each transition point in our lives we could choose to drift, or we could rethink our lives, pray and ask for God's guidance, and allow ourselves to be transformed. That's why a crisis is often the point where growth and transformation is most likely – because it's the moment when we are most open to new ways of thinking.

It's not hard to see how this idea applies to the church. In fact, a famous Episcopal author, Phyllis Tickle, in 2012 wrote a well-known book, *The Great Emergence*, in which she looks at the Christian church, and famously says, "Every 500 years, the church puts on a great rummage sale." If you're familiar with rummage sales, you know what happens. You keep the things that are essential and part of your core identity; you get rid of some older things that aren't working; you leave room for new things. In other words, you change, you grow, you allow yourself to be transformed. In her book, Phyllis Tickle narrates how this happened in the church around the years 500, 1000, and 1500.

And she says, around the year 2000, we are looking at a new huge change. Christianity today is no longer allied with power, it is no longer necessarily a social advantage to be a Christian, there is no longer an assumption that everyone will be Christian – we no longer live in a world called Christendom. Which means it's time for us to rethink who we are and how to do our mission. And whether we will survive or not – well, I believe the church will survive, because the message of Christ is eternal. But whether the Episcopal Church, or any individual congregation, will survive depends on how we respond to this moment – whether we think it's time to drift and let things go, or whether we see this moment as a learning opportunity, a challenge to try new things, an invitation to be transformed.

You could certainly say that Jewish people in Jesus' time found themselves in just that kind of transition point. The year 30 was clearly a time of crisis for Jews – they had been conquered over and over by powerful world empires–Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome–each one worse than the last. They were trying to rethink who God was in a world where God didn't give them worldly power, and how to even worship God in times of oppression. Some people thought they should accommodate themselves to the power of Rome and try to be Rome's allies; some thought they should ignore Rome altogether and separate themselves from the world around them; some people thought they should rebel against Rome.

Into this conflicted stew of ideas Jesus was born, and he brought transformation. He brought the ability to see what God was doing in a whole new way. Remember, in the crisis cycles, you keep the best of what is old, you hang onto your core identity, but you add new ideas, new ways of acting – which is exactly what Jesus did. In the Gospel of John we've been reading in worship, several weeks ago Jesus performed a sign – he fed thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of small fish. It reminded people of one of their oldest traditions, how in a previous crisis, the escape from slavery in Egypt, God fed them manna in the wilderness – mysterious bread that seemed to rain down from heaven.

Today Jesus is explaining how that ancient miracle is relevant to where the people of Israel are in his time, indeed where the people of the church are today. Today's gospel is what Jesus has been leading up to, with this whole Bread of Life discussion that's been going on for weeks now. This is the renewal, the new concept that will completely reshape who the followers of Jesus are and what our mission is in this world. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever," says Jesus, "and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life..... Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me."

Jesus, it turns out, is the bread of eternal life. Jesus is the nourishment from God that will save us and lead us to eternal and abundant life, now and forever. God's life lives in Jesus, and Jesus' life lives in us, and therefore we have eternal life. And, strangely enough, something we do in worship every week helps us to take that life of Jesus into ourselves. We eat the Bread of Life – Jesus himself. If it wasn't clear in the Bread of Life gospels we have been reading over the last few weeks that Jesus was talking about communion, this act of worship that we do each week, it becomes blazingly clear now – he says to eat his flesh and drink his blood. They are the same words we use in communion each week: this is my body, this is my blood.

We join ourselves to the life of Jesus as we eat and drink this holy communion. How? It's not that this sacrament we celebrate is some sort of magic. It's that it is a sign of a deeper spiritual truth that is happening to us and in us. It's that as we live a life of faith, as we take Jesus into ourselves, as we allow him to nourish us through word and sacrament, prayer and worship, we are slowly allowing him to transform us, at the cellular level, from the inside out.

And what we are being transformed into is the Body of Christ. We are becoming the people of mission, we are becoming the people who have the good news of Christ to proclaim. We are becoming the people commissioned to serve and love and give ourselves to this world in Jesus' name. That's our mission as a church. And every time the church enters a period of crisis and renewal, it is time to return to that mission – to consider how are we becoming the Body of Christ.

Here at Grace Church, you are at a transition point – a time when one rector has left and you will be beginning to discern who God might be calling to you next. Like any

other transition point, this is a time of crisis and renewal. It's a time to honor the best of what has gone before – the best of the generations of people and gifts that have made this church what it is. The best of the leadership that Fr. Dee Bright has given you. The best of the mission you have followed as the Body of Christ in this place. And it's also a time to think about how you should change and grow. To consider how to transform yourselves into a newly reconstituted group, on a mission to share the good news of Christ with this community.

Canon Bill Carroll will be here next week to help you start your process of discernment. But it won't just be discernment about a person – it will be discernment about your mission. In that discernment, the question you will be asking is, how are you called, here at Grace Church, to be witnesses? Witnesses to Christ. Witnesses to how God loves this community and this world. Witnesses to the work of love, witnesses to the kind of care and transformation and service of others that Christ's love inspires in the church and in each person who follows Jesus. Witnesses who open yourselves each day, and each week, in prayer and worship and service, to the Christ who in this holy sacrament, joins himself to us and transforms us into the Body of Christ in Ponca City, sharing Christ's mission in this community.