

'Til You Sing It

Sunday, March 15, 2009

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San Francisco Church of the New Jerusalem

Readings:

Isaiah 42:10 – 13

Psalm 137: 1-6

Secrets of Heaven #3175 (Translation by Robert Kirven)

In 1997, Donald Miller published a book called *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*. It addressed the reality of an already-changed church structure, particularly in mainline denominations, and discussed new possibilities. It became a foundational part of an ever-growing body of literature and data collection that pointed out that while we weren't paying close attention – or maybe while we were either praying for guidance or simply hoping the trend would go away – church, as it had been known and “done” in most of the twentieth century, changed dramatically and irrevocably.

I'm not certain that we Swedenborgians often think of ourselves as part of mainline Protestantism, but, structurally - regarding congregational life, liturgical organization and most of our church-connected practices – we are. I've learned to think of it as the “mini-mainline,” which means that whatever happens to mainline Protestantism happens to us – only we'll see it sooner because we're smaller and we have less bureaucracy to obscure change. This huge topic is not today's message (go ahead, breathe that sigh of relief), but the concept of change is basic to my thoughts today.

Many times since I became president of our denomination in 2004, I've used the opening sentence of the section on “Change” in Paul Sperry's book, *Words of Life*. “Change is essential to improvement.” Change involves awareness, choice and action. Change is in the heart of freedom which lies at the center of the process we call regeneration.

As a child growing up in a Swedenborgian Sunday School, the “three R's,” repentance, reformation and regeneration became an early mantra and nearly everything we learned connected with that process. Regeneration, which is the great essential to heavenly life, follows the repentance of a person who looks to the Lord with belief and who earnestly and lovingly does the Lord's will and chooses to act – to reform – accordingly, until the practice becomes the reality; the regeneration. Regeneration is simultaneously the goal, the overall process toward the goal, and a step in the process.

I believe that the regeneration concept can be applied to institutional change at some level. All institutions need to evaluate and regularly review the work they are doing. My attention was caught by a concept in a book written by Alice Mann in 1999 called *Can Our Church Live?* In this book she developed an idea that could easily be called the “three R's of church life:” Renewal, Revitalization and Redevelopment.

At some point in school you probably learned the structural outline of a short story using a diagram that looked like an inverted letter “V.” There were little names attached to this upside-down “V” shape. The lowest left-hand end of the line was called “Introduction” or something like that. From that point, the upward diagonal line was called “rising action.” The point at the top was identified as “climax.” The downward diagonal was called “falling action,” and the end of that line was called “conclusion.”

A similar image can be used to show the life of an institution such as a church. There is a beginning, there is growth, there is a high point, and then a downward journey until the institution ends its useful life. It’s on the “past the peak” journey that the concepts of Renewal, Revitalization and Redevelopment can occur.

(Renewal)

If a congregation is aware early in the process that there is need for change in the life of the church and they investigate how that can be done and then begin that process, it’s like a line coming from near the top of the “falling action” side that swings back over to the “rising action” diagonal. The need for change is diagnosed and stepped into early.

(Revitalization)

If a congregation waits a little longer to notice the need for change, then, when it learns how to approach that and decides to implement new processes, again it’s like a line swinging back over to the “rising” side and it’s called Revitalization that can lead to new life.

(Redevelopment)

Finally, if a congregation waits until nearly the end of the life of a church so that many programs and practices have already fallen by the wayside, research says that the only way to infuse new life into the organization is to find new ways of practice as well as understanding what is needed in a community and then stepping up to Redevelopment of the organization. This last type of change can also lead to a new path on the “rising action” side of the process. It is a long journey requiring patience, knowledge and new practices.

Diana Butler Bass led a multi-year study that looked at a large number of mainline churches throughout the U.S. that were experiencing renewal. In 2004, she presented some of the early findings in a book called ***The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church***. One of the basic points made in this small book is that a principle of congregational renewal, revitalization and redevelopment is that every person involved must “know your story and live it!” A church is its people, and the people are the representation and activity of their church in the world. If members don’t know and live their story, a church cannot survive.

At the completion of this study, she published a book called ***Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith***. This book doesn’t simply recount information from the study; it identifies specific ways that local churches have found to become vital, healthy, growing places in their neighborhoods by

reviewing their principles and identifying how what they believe can be most useful to the people they want to serve. Whether it's a focus on specific worship or spiritual practices, or whether it's a focus on service to the neighborhood, each of the successful transformations of churches that had been in decline was based on the principles of evaluation and new focus that resulted in renewal, revitalization or redevelopment. This doesn't mean that these churches became what they were before; it indicates that they made informed choices to change to be a better presence in today's world. Change, as Paul Sperry said, is essential to improvement.

Over the past several years, I've read a variety of books and articles on societal culture shifts and on changes in church life and programs in this twenty-first century. In 1998, Spencer Johnson published *Who Moved My Cheese?* With its cast of characters: two mice, Sniff and Scurry, and two mouse-sized humans, Hem and Haw, Johnson, using a parable of moving through a maze in search of New Cheese taught us about the things that can impede change and the processes and attitudes that can assist it. Two years later, Robert Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone*, which identified the collapse of the American community of previous decades and provided information on how community life is being re-created in the twenty-first century. This has huge implications for churches as the volunteer base so necessary to church life has eroded and lives have become 24/7 which creates havoc with those time slots that churches have so long cherished as worship hours, as committee meeting time, or as music group rehearsal time.

Jim Collins wrote *Good to Great* in 2001 and in this book he looked at how excellence in leadership and productivity in corporate America is achieved in the 21st century. In 2005, he produced a monograph titled *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* which distilled the ideas from the previous work and recast them for application to social organizations which would include churches. Collins gives insight into creating strong leadership and ways to carefully identify and hone the special thing (call it a hedgehog) that a group such as a church has, and offers guidance in supporting and marketing that specific focus well. The careful identification of what is unique and useful resonates with much of the information offered by Diana Butler Bass that shows how churches are finding new life and use in their communities by identifying their specific, special gifts and talents.

Jim Collins states:

“Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of choice and discipline.” This, I believe, has connection with the process of regeneration. Regeneration asks us to choose a path and then follow the actions it dictates. This reformation period is truly a period of self-discipline that leads ultimately to incorporating something new; that leads to regeneration.

Change doesn't mean that what went before is completely lost. In looking at the church studies that were done, we see that while it's not possible to continue everything from the past, we have the opportunity to choose what to take forward, knowing that what we no longer use is part of the foundation that supports what comes next. The same holds true, I think, in the ongoing process of regeneration. It isn't a one-time thing. The

process is ongoing and the energy we bring to the work of regeneration is based on all that we've learned and all that we are.

The members and friends of this church (the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church) are engaged in a process of change that's based on knowing this church's story – and identifying how that story can best be lived in the world. This church community is on a journey of remembering, evaluating and constructing a forward-looking path firmly founded on its history. This is an active, prayerful, meaningful engagement that is based on knowing and living the story of this church in useful ways in this millennium.

The remainder of my remarks today are based on the concept of the past being the building blocks of the future and on knowing and living your own story. The central idea comes from that unheralded theologian, Oscar Hammerstein, II, who wrote: “A song is no song till you sing it.” (Depending on your personal place in life, you may have just thought about Austria, bells and love...or you're wondering who Oscar Hammerstein is.) I'd like to share two brief “song stories” with you.

(Story One)

Years ago, I watched a movie called “Enemy Mine.” This is my memory of that film:

An American astronaut and an alien being are stranded in a cave on some world in space. Ultimately a rescue will be effected, but not for a significant amount of time. The two are enemies, and it takes some time for them to realize that unless they find ways to cooperate, they will each die. And so, grudgingly, they begin slowly to work together for survival. As time goes by, they begin to learn some bits of each other's languages and they begin to share some stories of themselves. The alien being conveys the message that he (and I'm using the masculine pronoun only because Lou Gosset, Jr., played the role but the being is sort of androgynous) is pregnant, and it transpires that the infant is born. The alien and the astronaut care for the little one. The alien becomes weaker and weaker, and it's apparent that he will not be able to get back to his homeworld with his offspring.

A child in the alien's world must be presented to its community and the child's history – its genealogy – must be sung before it can become a member of the society. This child's parent was not going to live long enough to do that for the child. So, in a truly unselfish act, the astronaut pledges to take the infant to its home world, and for the next several weeks he works to learn the words and the melody of the child's history so that he will be able to sing the child into its society.

(Story Two)

This concept is not unique to this science fiction film. There is a story from Africa that when a woman of a certain tribe knows she is pregnant, she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends and together they pray and meditate until they hear the song of the child. They recognize that every soul has its own vibration that expresses its

unique flavor and purpose. When the women attune to the song, they sing it out loud. Then they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else.

When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child's song to the child. Later, when the child enters education, the village gathers and chants the child's song. When the child passes through the initiation to adulthood, the people again come together and sing. At the time of marriage, the person hears his or her song. Finally, when the soul is about to pass from this world, the family and friends gather at the person's bed, just as they did at the birth, and they sing the person to the next life.

There is one other occasion when the villagers sing a person's song, and that's if the person has committed a crime or has otherwise done something damaging to the community. At that point, the person is called to the center of the village and the people in the community gather around the person and sing the person's song to them. This is done in love and remembrance, for the villagers believe that when you recognize your own song, you will have no desire or need to do anything that would hurt someone.

Conclusion:

We all have our own songs. Dr. Alice Skinner has written that while men and women often approach and understand life differently, there are some spirituality elements common to both. One of the commonalities is that both men and women find meaning in their lives through reflecting on their experiences. Today's reading from *Secrets of Heaven* #3175 reminded us that human beings need to learn, and that learning occurs through external paths. As long as what is learned is kept in memory, it is only data, **but for knowledge to truly become part of a person, it must be called from memory, examined and placed more deeply inward.**

Our reflections – our experiences and our choices – are the songs that we create. They are the historic truths that support us; that help us to know who we are and that give us a framework for the next set of verses or variations on our song. In the opening pages of the United Methodist hymnal is a list of Charles Wesley's "Rules of Good Singing." The very first rule is to "Sing lustily and with good spirit!" What a great metaphor for living our lives! We need to know our history to be supported in change, we need to know our story and live it, and we need to be open to receiving good and truth to honestly enter into the process of regeneration.

Our songs – our lives – are part of our communities – whether of this world or the world of the spirit. We need to add our songs into the beautiful complexities of those harmonies.

Please: Sing your songs lustily and with good spirit! Use them as supports to move onward in your journey and share them with others in a life of usefulness. Remember: a song is no song 'til you sing it!