

Shape Shifters: Phyllis Tickle
John 1:1-18 (Erasmus translation)

If you're a regular around here, you may have noticed that the order of this service is a little different than it is most Sundays. The time for offering came before the message; I suggested at the beginning that you have a piece of bread and a cup of something in front of you. That's because it's the first Sunday of a month, so we'll gather in a few minutes around the communion table. That's the tradition of this church.

To call something a tradition it suggests that always do it this way. That we've always *done* it this way. Maybe your family always eats pizza on Friday night. The church's rummage sale is always in May. But the truth is, the idea of 'tradition' is more flexible than that. Some of our traditions are generations old. Some of them are things we've now done the same way twice.

We often talk about Christianity, the beliefs and practices of our faith tradition, as if it's a given, fixed thing, delivered to us in a box two thousand years ago. But that's not really true. Just like everything else that's alive, Christianity keeps growing, changing shape. Our tradition re-thinks itself—it allows *us* to re-think it—so that it makes sense now. So that we can look in its mirror and find there not only the first followers of Jesus, but people who look like us, people who live lives like ours. And if we are growing into the likeness of God, our tradition's mirror will also reflect back to us people who don't look like us at all.

For the next few weeks we're going to talk about some people who have changed the shape of the Christian tradition we think of as ours, now. Changemakers whose thinking and writing have made a difference in the way progressive Christians understand God and the way we understand what it means to live as part of God's story. We can't talk about all the influential theologians, of course; you'd have to take a whole college course--maybe two or three--to do that. We're going to focus on just a few who have influenced Christianity in the last hundred years.

And I want you to know that I know that our focus here is *very* limited. There are many Christianity's, just like there are multiple strands of every religion: progressive and fundamentalist followers of Islam, orthodox and reform Jews. If we were part of a different strand of Christianity—more evangelical, say—or if we lived in a different part of the world—Africa, Asia, Latin America—we'd have been influenced by different voices. The shape of our faith would have stretched in different directions.

God is universal, for everyone. The way we see and understand God is limited, always.

Phyllis Tickle was a historian. She died just a few years ago, in 2015. She's best known for her observation that if you look back through Western civilization, you can see that every five hundred years or so, there has been a time of upheaval, almost cataclysmic change. At each of those moments, Tickle said, almost everything in the Western world—institutions, traditions, beliefs, where we look for authority—has gotten re-sorted, re-arranged. From each of these pivot

points, humanity has moved forward in a slightly different direction from where it was going before.

We can trace this history with her. Two thousand years ago was the event that gave birth to Christianity: Jesus, a person who was seen as God on earth, God in human form. The *Great Transformation*, Tickle calls this. Even for people who are not followers of Jesus, something shifted on the earth in that moment--something so significant, that history is dated from that point in time. Time is divided into A.D. and B.C., or as we say now, C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (Before the Common Era).

Five hundred years later, the Roman Empire declined: the *Great Fall*. Roman civilization that had ordered government and economy and social structure for the whole classical world crumbled away. Western culture entered a time that felt like chaos, a dark age, for hundreds of years afterward.

About five hundred years after that was the *Great Schism* of the 11th century, when the Western Roman Church, split from Eastern Orthodox Christianity. This change impacted far more than religion. It severed Eastern ways from Western ways in every aspect of life. We still live with this separation.

And then, about five hundred years ago, in the 16th century, came the *Great Reformation*. This was a time of enormous cultural and political and intellectual change. It ushered in what we think of as the modern era of science, politics, philosophy. And religion—Protestant Christianity split from the one holy, catholic Church. Protestant thought began many of the religious traditions we still practice.

And here we are, five hundred years later, now in the early stages of what Tickle called the *Great Emergence*. Everything is changing again, she said. The changes are too big for us to understand fully what they will bring; it's too early to have much historical perspective.

The shifts are cultural—as we move from modern to a post-modern way of thinking; they're political—we see this in mistrust of the institutions of government; they are scientific—we are just learning to adapt to climate change and our human power to destroy one another on a mass scale.

Our religion too is changing. The traditions and beliefs that served the Church well for five hundred years no longer make much sense to many people. This isn't a death knell for Christianity, Tickle says; but it's time for the Church to hold a 500-year garage sale, let go of old traditions that aren't useful and that no longer make sense.

The reason for letting go isn't just survival of the Church; it's to make room so that something new can grow. The *emerging* Christianity, she said, will look different than it did in its last era.

- It will be radically obedient to the words and teachings of Christ, as we find them in the Bible and also as we know them in our own prayer and spiritual connection with God. Fewer words, more action.

- It will put its trust in the power and the truth of stories, far more than in creeds and statements of belief. Our experience of God will be what matters, far more than the rightness of our beliefs *about* God.
- We will speak of God understanding that what we say and what we believe is part of an ongoing conversation, not a final and fixed statement of what is ultimately and eternally true.
- The emerging Christianity will always opt [she says] for grace over morality—doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly, rather than waving around a religious sword of judgment.
- It will act and believe and live knowing that the Kingdom of God is *both* right here and not yet arrived, so what matters is not some other world we’re preparing for, but how we live every minute of every day.

I think you will recognize in this description a Christianity that is already emerging. And if Phyllis Tickle is right, if what we see now is just a glimpse of what is to come, then I am hopeful. It helps me to be a little more gentle on the world and on my Church, knowing that its renovation is just beginning.

There’s one more thing in Phyllis Tickle’s writings that I want to tell you about, that I find fascinating. She sifts through and ties together a number of transitions that we’ve seen affect Christianity in the last hundred years. One is the Pentecostal movement, which began in the early 1900’s. Pentecostalism is today the fastest-growing sect of Christianity in the world. What distinguishes Pentecostal Christianity is its focus on an experience that is named the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Its practitioners speak in tongues; often they experience miraculous healings. They are, literally, moved by the Spirit—quite differently from the way of cathedral’d Protestant worship that has dominated the last five hundred years of Christianity.

Tickle also notices the increasing awareness and curiosity, in the last fifty years, about more mystical spiritualities—Buddhism, Sufiism, native American spirituality. (Remember Hare Krishnas?)

And then, she says, there’s now this great wave of people who refer to themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’—meaning they are looking for some direct and personal experience of an internal, mysterious spirit, rather than the regulated and solid path of organized religion.

All of these trends pointed Tickle back to the work of a twelfth century Italian monk named Joachim of Fiore. Joachim’s work was the deep understanding of Scripture, the Bible. In his intense studies and visions, he came to believe that human life on earth could be divided into three eras, defined by the way God is present to us. The first was the Age of the Father, when the Holy was understood in the God we see in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. God as Creator, Orderer of life, Giver of Law. The Age of the Father ended when Jesus came, Joachim said; humans entered the Age of the Son, when God became known to us in that one human life and then in the growth of the church.

Joachim believed that era was ending too, and that the earth would soon begin to live in the Age of the Spirit, when people would connect to the Divine not as servants, not even as children, but as friends. This transition would be marked, Joachim said (in the 12th century!) by lessening importance of church structures, creeds, clergy. A greater sense—in all people—of a direct and personal connection with the Spirit of God.

Joachim's theory never really caught on back then. But what if, Phyllis Tickle asks, he was just ahead of his time? What if the Age of the Spirit is just beginning now? Maybe Pentecostal, Spirit-driven Christians, and all those young people who are searching for something they don't find in church, are not abandoning something true, but teaching us, leading us into a new truth about how God is moving among us now, inviting every person, every part of creation, into a Spirit-filled connection.

Christians, of all people, trust a cycle that brings new life out of death. Maybe, Phyllis Tickle says, the things that cause us despair suggest that we are just now entering an age when God will be among us again, in ways we are just beginning to know.

May it be so.