

Parting Words
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Revelation 21:10-11 May 2, 2010
 John 14:23-29

One of the more endearing characteristics of the disciples, for me, has always been that they are so like us. In all their strength and courage and in all their disappointing failure of nerve they are early prototypes of discipleship in the church over the following centuries.

What makes them unique, of course, is that they actually experienced the transition from the historical Jesus to the Jesus now ascended to be with the Father in glory. In his place Jesus promises them that the Father will send an advocate, one who will intervene on their behalf, the Holy Spirit. So, they were the first to experience what it was like to live in two worlds: the world of experience with Jesus, the incarnate revelation of God, who walked their dusty roads and lived and ate and slept where they did; and the world of new creation where unexpected

intersections with the God of the old covenant and the revelation of God's new covenant occur.

Needless to say this is not what the disciples have in mind. They like things more predictable. They do not seek to be surprised by Jesus who is inclined to introduce new patterns of relationship when they least expect it.

Just when they are reaching a level of comfort and familiarity with him he is gone and has put another in his place to communicate with them; the counselor, the advocate, the Spirit of present and future experience who has long-standing connections to the past. His parting words to them are words of reassurance, an older brother assuring younger siblings that things are going to be alright in his absence and that they should not be afraid. He implies that they will actually like the one who comes to guide them into the days ahead.

This pattern of moving, however reluctantly, from the familiar to the unfamiliar is a common one in our culture. Many of us have experienced our own resistance to embrace new developments, whether in computer technologies or changes in health care plans or transitions in cities and neighborhoods. We are not immune in the church either as we struggle to adapt to and embrace new forms of worship and music, or new

leadership on the horizon when those we have known and loved for years retire, or simply changes in the physical look of the place.

The other night we were having dinner with some friends who have been to Paris in recent years. While there they went to visit the Louvre Museum, as much as anything to see the changes introduced – some would say inflicted – by the architect, Mr. I. M. Pei and his associates. Pei's group, as you know, won the commission to reorganize the museum space, to redesign the flow of pedestrian traffic in the museum and to provide it with new, large public spaces. The solution, you may recall, is a series of several glass pyramids that peek above the courtyard pavement and give light and freedom of movement to vast new spaces below the pavement, connecting the many wings of the Louve into a cohesive whole.

This design has generated strong responses from people who either love it or hate it. Few are indifferent. This new design is not what anyone expected. Over time, the positive responses seem to be winning the day, especially among those who have no recollection of how the museum used to be.

You may have almost missed the brief reading from the book of Revelation, chapter 21. The author is sharing with us his

vision of a time to come when all disharmony and all dissonance will be resolved in one lyrical song, a revelation of the one God's plan for the world. The writer's device is a vision of what he calls a "new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God; it had the radiance of some priceless jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal." (Revelation 21:10-11)

One of the 20th century's leading exponents of neo-Gothic architecture as a form to define many grand and glorious spaces for worship in the last hundred years was a man named Ralph Adams Cram, a Boston architect. Now, talk about the old and the new, the traditional expressions of the past intersecting the movements of the present and the future! Here you have it in a design of the Middle Ages reintroduced in our time because it appeared to many to bespeak "church" and "tradition".

In one of Cram's churches, however, there is an intriguing interface between this familiar Gothic form and Revelation's vision of a NEW Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. What Cram did was this: above the crossing of the axis of the long aisle and that of the transepts there is a magnificent chandelier about 10 feet in diameter formed of a variety of little metal buildings representing a city on a hill. Each little structure becomes a housing for lights that shine down to illuminate the

space below. The entire structure hangs about forty feet above the crossing looking as though in any moment it will continue its descent into the space where the congregation worships every Sunday. It is, figuratively, the vision realized, the vision spoken by the holy one in John's Revelation, who promised to make all things new, ready or not. And every time that congregation gathers for worship in that place they are reminded, if they will only look up, of the promise of God that we are not abandoned. Rather, we are part of a vision God has for a future time more rewarding than any we have known in the past. All that is required is that we give attention to the new vision in order to be caught up in its light and promise.

Several years ago my family and I lovingly restored an English style barn in Maine, first built with a post and beam frame in 1790. We had it moved some fifty miles from Farmington, Maine to our place, where we go in vacation times and where, someday, we really will retire. It is a magnificent structure with hewn oak beams as much as thirty-two feet in length and as thick as a golden retriever's chest, crossing the width. (I know this is beginning to sound more like a treatise on architecture than a sermon. But stay with me and let's see where it goes.)

With the help of a crane and many strong backs the frame was lifted up to its full height. Then a new skin of vertical barn boards covered with cedar shingles was attached to the outside and a new roof was installed. The front façade, under the long, straight eave, is very plain with minimal openings. There is a pedestrian door on the far right and one small four-paned window and another door on the far left. Toward the middle of the front, and little off-center, is a large sliding barn door that opens to one of the bays inside, the old threshing floor. This front side presents no surprises to the observer from the road and even looks as though it may shelter animals, which it doesn't.

But on the opposite side of the building, facing the fields to the east, and on the gabled end facing to the south and north, there is a festival of light thanks to an unexpected number of windows. Entire sections of walls are opened up in contemporary patterns as these windows allow the interior to be washed with light as it never was before.

In the interior on the ground level there are traditional storage areas, a workshop, small boat storage, etc. But in the upper levels where rooms have been created we were able to bring in light by punching the non-bearing exterior walls with openings to the world outside. Here there are guest rooms, a

study or two, more storage and open lofts, all of it looking out to the view.

This other, unconventional dimension of the barn has been influenced by the work of two contemporary Philadelphia architects in particular, Robert Venturi and Denis Scott-Brown (If they had really designed it the form would have been far more radical than it is.)

This mixing of the familiar and the not-yet familiar is a favorite practice of architects and often a necessity, as when a client needs an addition to a fine but older building. Think of the East Wing addition to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, another I.M. Pei creation, and you will see what I mean.

This is also a pattern we find again and again in the scriptures as the new fulfills the old. We are not speaking here of replacing that which has gone before but, rather, improving on it, filling out the former, giving the old a new application to meet current demands. Perhaps God knew, as the disciples did not, that a Jesus in sandals, confined to a lifetime geography within a radius of fifty or sixty miles from his home, would have a diminishing reach in times to come.

But a resurrected Lord whose ministry is fulfilled by the advocate, the Holy Spirit, has a contemporary reach that is without geographic or other limit. This one who intervenes for us, this one who has been sent by the Father who loves us, is the one in whom we are now to live and move and have our being.

In this new place, our Lord promises in his parting words, you will find a new sense of self, and a peace that is not of this world. Finally you will find an end to fears that stop all creativity and you will discover yourself ready, by faith, to take risks in the present for something that is worth having in the future.