

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*Change in the Air*  
*Ecclesiastes 5.1-2 and Mark 4.1-12<sup>1</sup>*  
Russ Dean, September 27, 2009



Change is in the air. I can feel it. On Friday morning I headed out to our seven-o'clock men's Bible study, and as I do on many Fridays, I took the Harley. As the back door closed behind me I smelled it for the first time. When I rattled down the drive and rumbled through the turn at the corner, there was no doubt about it. Black leather was the right choice for the cool four-mile spin to the Tryon House. By the time we had solved all the world's problems, it was gone. But it only takes a hint of Change in the Air to know that fall, is just around the corner.

Change is in the air. I can feel it. It crackles with the hope of renewing opportunity and creaks with the foreshadowing of ominous possibility. In her brief but insightful book, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle, editor of the Religion Department of *Publisher's Weekly* says this

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<sup>11</sup> Because today's sermon is dependent on the idea of listening (how we learn, etc...), I took the liberty to paraphrase one of Jesus' most well-known parables, the parable of the Sower. The text, as I read it, is as follows:

*Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:*

(a paraphrase) 'Listen! A teacher went about teaching. And in her classes some students were too distracted by life, so occupied with their blackberries and their important schedules, often too tired to stay awake, that they did not even hear what she had to say. Other students really were eager to listen, and they enjoyed the subject and were engaged by her lectures, but when class had ended they put away their books and gave their time to other things. Not having studied on their own, having applied themselves to the subject, they, too, failed the teacher's exams. Other students were eager to learn, intelligent and hard-working, they stayed awake in class, studied long hours at night, "aced" every test. But beyond class, they ascribed little value to the subject – it was just an academic exercise for them – so the time they spent made little difference in their lives. But there were others. They weren't necessarily "Dean's List" students, but they did attention in class, and they applied themselves in their studies, and they sought to find application of the subject in their every-day life. These were the only students who prospered from the teacher and her teaching.

*And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'*

*When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."'*

change is affecting “every part of our lives... everything we do socially, culturally, intellectually, politically, economically.” She identifies this change as just the most recent in a 500-year cycle that has enhanced life on this planet, and religion in particular – but hardly in way as pleasing to the national and individual soul as the change in the season is to our physical senses. This pattern has produced earth-shattering, thought-altering changes that build like a rising wave and perhaps can only appear beautiful to those not caught when it all comes crashing down on a new shore.

Five hundred years ago the Protestant Reformation stormed onto the scene, and 500 years before that the Church was torn down the middle, leaving an Eastern Orthodoxy and a Roman Catholicism finding their way in separate freedoms. Roughly five centuries before that we find the fall of Rome and a series of great church councils that established their demanding orthodoxy in an effort to codify the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth whose disturbing presence, yet 500 years earlier, had changed everything.<sup>2</sup> The life and death and an epiphany which Jesus’ Jewish followers called resurrection even became the dividing point in the calendar of human history. Before Christ. In the Year of our Lord. Tickle continues, but I’ll stop here. 2000 years is enough to convince me she’s onto something – big! Cataclysmic changes have been in store for the human creature every 500 years, and you and I chose our parents well-enough that we don’t get to miss this one! These changes have always come in the wake of new politics or new science or new technology – but the Church, perhaps because the Church resists change even more than most institutions, has felt as much of the upheaval as anyone. It’s happening again.

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<sup>2</sup> Tickle admits that assigning a specific date to these upheavals is a bit of a contrivance, though generally speaking the 500-year cycle holds. The Protestant Reformation can be conveniently dated 1517 CE, the year Martin Luther posted his complaints on the door of the Wittenberg Church. The great schism between the Eastern and Western Churches is 1054 CE. There is no specific date for the fall of Rome (she cites the fifth century CE), ditto the great councils of the church, which generally occurred in the fourth century CE. The birth and death of Jesus, of course, dates to the beginning of the Common Era (or, A.D, in the year of our Lord).

Change is in the air. I can feel it. It's what a sabbatical is supposed to do – make us smell it, make us welcome it. Amy and I sense that our three-month separation has done just that. A wealth of tradition has developed in Park Road Baptist Church's brief 59-year history. One of the problems with tradition (in any place) is that sometimes newcomers have trouble finding their way among all the in-house jargon, the inside jokes, the tightly-held bonds of our small community clusters – but this church has in its genetic makeup, I believe, an openness to change.

For example, when it was being organized, in a day when customs and traditions and doctrines were often destructively strong, a day when the South still frowned upon divorce with the disapproving glaze of its parochial religion, the organizing members of this church said, “Not here. We're going to be different. All people will be welcome here. Yes, even ‘divorcees!’” Years later that same openness to changing mores and ideas led this community to adopt a “noncompulsory baptism” policy – accepting for membership any who expressed a desire to join with in this community of faith – regardless how wet they'd ever gotten in a baptistery! (Or if they'd been in one at all.<sup>3</sup>) That same seed of openness led to your acceptance of homosexual persons into the full participating life of this church, a practice that was embraced, but which

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<sup>3</sup> I once heard a Baptist minister explain that though baptism by immersion is required for membership in (most) Baptist churches, “the water doesn't save you.” As a proof-text, he offered Jesus' words to the dying thief on the cross: “*Today thou shalt be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23.43). Believing firmly that there is no salvation in water, and taking the freedoms of our Baptist identity to a somewhat unique extreme, many years ago, under the iconoclastic leadership of its founding pastor, Charlie Milford, Park Road Baptist Church adopted a policy affirming baptism by immersion when practiced, but stating, “Baptism is encouraged, but not required.” Though many progressive Baptist churches now accept what Southern Baptists called “alien baptism” (baptism by means other than immersion!), I am not aware of another Baptist church which exercises a similar policy. Though our policy took my died-in-the-wool Baptist spirit some time to adjust to, I initially accepted it, as the historical practice of this church, but have come to affirm its convictions: though rites/rituals are important, Baptists have always affirmed the radical freedom of the individual to stand before God, fully free, with no dependence on creeds, sacraments or sacred rites, as the necessary mediators of salvation. (I do strongly advocate believer's baptism by immersion as a deeply meaningful expression of faith, but believe that much of the Baptist practice of so-called “believer's baptism” really demeans this holy act, cheapening it into a kind of initiation rite.) If I must err as one who places full trust in the grace and goodness of God (for all, including the non-baptized), over one who dutifully affirms the dogmatic positions of Church or denomination, let me err as one who trusts. Such is the nature of faith.

only became “official” policy a few years ago. Under the able leadership of caring, but challenging pastors, you moved from an evangelism that saved souls, “like fire brands from the burning,”<sup>4</sup> to a social gospel that seeks the salvation of the whole person, beginning with one’s physical needs, and the salvation of the earth itself as our calling in mission. You moved from a theology which for too many was based in fear, to one which centers in the love of God, known in Jesus.

Though newcomers do, occasionally, comment on the strength of our traditions, many new members over the last decade have found their way into active service – 55% of our committee members and 25% of our deacons were not in the church when Amy and I became your pastors. So, even with our traditions, I believe we are a church which is open to change – and Amy and I have returned from sabbatical believing that as the leaves begin to hint of their turning, and amid a 500-year world-wide revolution, Change is in the Air again, right here.

We have been talking with our staff and deacon leadership about this, and we sense an openness to newness, still with us. But the question is, “Where will this change take us? Who will it make us?” Will this *Spirit* [just] *move* [us] *where it will*? Will we be tossed about by the anxious uncertainty in the air, landing haphazardly along some unsettled shore? Or will we seek that new horizon with a deliberate discipleship – giving ourselves to the challenging but fulfilling calling of listening to the winds of change that blow around us, listening to one another, and listening for the voice of God, that when we land, and where, we might do so with a humble but confident sense that we are where and who God wants us to be?

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<sup>4</sup> I often heard Charlie Milford say that he had come to this church with a passion “to save souls like fire brands from the burning.” This was adamantly NOT Charlie’s position for the last decades of his life!

I believe Change is in the Air. It is my earnest prayer that in the coming months we will commit ourselves, individually and corporately, to an intentional discipline of listening. The old preacher of Ecclesiastes<sup>5</sup> says this is why and how we come to this place. It's not about our words. It's about God's Word. Let me not be trite about this. I'm not claiming that Amy and I bring it to you every Sunday, or that it's available like an Oprah show, or a self-help book. But I do believe, as have some of the greatest minds in human history, that this elusive, ephemeral, ineffable Word may be heard... in a word... in a song... in a picture... in a symphony... in the breeze that blows... in the Grand Canyon or the Bank of America tower... in silence.

If we know how to listen.

Have we really come here to listen?

Amy and I want to invite you to that task. Here. And in your home. And in your car. (Cut off the radio and listen.) And at your place of work. And in school. Listen... Over the next few weeks, she and I will call together some small groups, rather randomly chosen, to sit with us, maybe in the quiet of our back patio, to sit together in stillness, in silence, in prayer, and to talk together about the change we are... "hearing." If you want to be a part of this, I invite you to let us know it, specifically. This will be no exclusive club, the idea is not to avoid anyone in particular – on the other hand, we don't have time to invite you all! We want to practice listening that we may develop "*ears to hear.*"

Last week, an email encouraged but challenged your pastors in this task of preaching. We are listening. Some of you want less from the pulpit (we've heard from you). This email encouraged us to bring more! The email quoted two lines of a hymn we sang in last Sunday's

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<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word from which "Ecclesiastes" is derived is *qoheleth*, which can be translated, "preacher."

service: “But you [O God] have formed the human mind to follow truth beyond old boundaries and beckon us toward knowledge yet unfound.”<sup>6</sup> “That’s what I want from sermons,” the email said, “to be challenged to find ‘new truth.’”

It resonated with what we’ve been saying since we returned from sabbatical, “Are we listening, are we ready, willing to change as need be, to live fully as a 21<sup>st</sup> century church?” Are we open to new truth, “come whence it may, cost what it will”?<sup>7</sup> But the challenge has also perplexed us. What “new truth” is there in Jesus’ parable of the sower? Preachers have been mining this text for 20 centuries, always finding the same gold as when Jesus spoke it. This church has been willing to make some pretty radical changes in its past. So – yes – let us be open should that moment come again. But we need to be careful lest our desire to hear some “new truth” leads us down a road of fad or passing fancy. And, is there really any “new truth” to be discovered – or is all the truth (even truths that have led to 500-year cataclysmic changes) really the same old truth God has been speaking from the beginning?

As we listen, together, for God’s “new truth,” these thoughts...

Some of us need to be open to moving “forward.” Listening carefully, leaving behind a childish faith. Accepting, maybe finally accepting, that God is more than we learned in third grade Sunday School classes. That there’s more to Adam and Even than an apple and a snake... more to Jonah than a fish... more to resurrection than an event of history 2,000 years ago.<sup>8</sup> Some need to move forward and learn to hear the mythic truth of scripture. Some need to move

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<sup>6</sup> This verse of “We Praise You, God, for Truth Received, by Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr., concludes, “let neither fear nor weariness subvert the ardent quest that sets our feet on paths untrod and robs our hearts of rest.”

<sup>7</sup> The motto of the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA (where Bishop John Shelby Spong earned his degree) is: “Seek the truth come whence it may, cost what it will.”

<sup>8</sup> I am convinced that even in a church such as ours many/most people still generally conceive of scripture in a wooden fashion, basically reading for concrete/literal “facts” and a truth which can be derived from these essential facts. In my view, such a reading robs a text, and the Bible as a whole, of its rich texture, its most powerful meaning.

forward and accept that God's truths will necessarily put us at odds with the Conventional Wisdom of the world – whatever this may mean for how we conduct our business, how we cast our votes, how we spend our free time, how tightly we cling to our money. Some of us need to move forward in our faith.

And some of us need to move back. To return to some of the truths we abandoned in a search for a so-called enlightened, rational faith. We need to learn to read, again, scripture, as it was intended – which is to say, without the hindrance of a modern critical mind, obsessed with whether or not it “really happened.” We, too, need to learn to hear the mythic truth of scripture. We need to re-learn some of the habits of religious practice, first and foremost, the practice of prayer. Some are so preoccupied with deconstructing the idea of prayer, so set against the concept of intercession, that this act, which has been at the heart of the human soul since humans evolved self-consciousness... some are so intellectually set against it that prayer, the discipline, the practice of giving ourselves to listening... never has a chance to change anything – especially us.<sup>9</sup>

In her wonderful book called *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong takes up my song.

Religion (she says) is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart... It is no use magisterially weighing up the teachings of religion to judge their truth or falsehood before embarking on a religious way of life. You will discover their truth – or lack of it – only if you translate these doctrines into ritual or ethical action.<sup>10</sup>

If you do not know the author, Karen Armstrong is no closet charismatic, no peddler of feel-good, warm-fuzzy faith, and hers is not the latest 1-2-3 religious self-help

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<sup>9</sup> Several years ago we added an Intercessory Prayer to our order of worship, this congregation for many years (if ever) had not had such a moment in its worship services. The response was strong from the “left” side of the sanctuary! Though I understand, and actually agree with many of the intellectual concerns behind the comments we entertained, I still affirm the importance of “lifting our concerns to God,” to borrow that phrase. I believe this has been an important addition to our worship service.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, p. xiii.

guide one how to get close to God. Her books are as dense, her writing as acclaimed, as any academician in print today. And she is speaking to us. We who need to return to an ancient truth, turning our attention away from a “believing” centered religion, to a practice-oriented faith.

One of the conditions of enlightenment (she concludes) has always been a willingness to let go of what we thought we knew in order to appreciate truths we had never dreamed of. We may have to unlearn a great deal about religion before we can move on to new insight.<sup>11</sup>

For some, that un-learning will move us “forward.” For others, it will move us “backward.”

For all... as we listen, may we be open to move, as the Wind of God wills, recognizing that the future of faith is, finally, neither “forward” nor “backward,” but deeper. Deeper, more fully engaged in the practice of faith which is always newly-ancient, more deeply immersed in the practice of listening for God.

May it be so!

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<sup>11</sup> Armstrong, p. xviii.