**The Emerging Church Movement**

 For those who are not familiar with it, the name “Emerging Church” sounds scary. It sounds like a threat to the Christianity they have come to love. For some, words like “emerging” and “movement” conjure up images of a cult. Hopefully I can alleviate your fears and help you appreciate why many of us are so excited about this emerging (also referred to as emergent) faith community.

First, Emerging Christianity is not, I repeat not, a new denomination. If anything, it is just the opposite. The emergent movement feels that denominational Christianity, at least at the institutional level, has probably done more harm than good in helping people develop a personal relationship with God and a well-functioning relational community that interacts as Jesus intended. By its very nature, a denomination defines itself based upon specific doctrines of belief. Membership in the denomination is then defined by one’s assent to those doctrines. Critical statements of belief delineate the nature of Jesus’ divinity and the nature of his atonement for the sins of humanity. Assent to these fundamentals of faith then place one inside the denomination, while all others are excluded.

The Emerging Church movement within Christianity has two problems (or at least two) with this approach. First, God is a mystery, a marvelous, awesome mystery that cannot be distinctly defined or placed in a box. To imply that God can is ludicrous, not to mention irreverent. The emerging movement recognizes that valuable images of God can be found in all branches of Christianity (and other faith traditions). Is it not more useful to look across the various faith traditions to find rituals, practices, prayers, liturgies, and worship styles that help people experience God’s presence and make them available to all who seek that connectedness? Also, is it not time to purge, or at least disregard, those practices which are harmful, those which promote exclusion, judgment, and divisiveness? Does anyone really want to follow a God who reconciles with a few select people while excluding the vast majority of others? That’s not the image of God given to us by Jesus.

The second problem the Emerging Church movement has with defining faith through a series of “correct” beliefs is that this practice has little or nothing to do with the things that were actually important to Jesus, neither in how he lived or how he taught. A careful reading of the Gospels shows a Jesus who cares very little about people’s beliefs. In fact, he makes a point of showing how those with officially sanctioned beliefs and behaviors, the Pharisees and Scribes, often don’t have a clue as to the true nature of God’s wishes for God’s people. Rather than focusing on belief, Jesus taught a new way of living, one defined by radical love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and service to others. He called this the “Kingdom of God”, which distinguished it from the Kingdom of Caesar, or any other prior imperial kingdom or empire. It is the way the world would look if God reigned in the hearts of humankind. The Emerging Church movement is focused on rediscovering this message of Jesus and discerning how best to communicate it to others in ways that will transform each of us so that we may individually and corporately bring Jesus’ ways into the world. This often results in practices that seem foreign to those who define their church experience by Sunday attendance. It has resulted in “new monastic communities”, located in the poorest urban and rural areas, communities of people actively seeking those who are most oppressed or marginalized by society, exactly like Jesus. It has resulted in people immersing themselves in political activism (just like the Jewish prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus) to promote non-violence and social justice. It has produced faith communities more interested in showing people they are precious and loved, helping them belong, without first requiring them to believe. Pastors with an Emergent perspective seek to develop a 24/7 community that just happens to be a church, not vice versa. Building relationships trumps adherence to tradition and doctrine. Worship becomes merely one element of this community whose primary focus is relational and missional.

Another facet of the Emerging Christian movement is a renewed focus on experiential faith. As the church adapted to modern times, it began to lose its spirituality, its ability to serve as a place where people not only learned about God, but actually experienced God’s presence. Faith communities should be able to lead us into mystical states where we sense God’s presence in a powerful way. The Reformation (approx. 500 years ago), with its focus on scripture alone (Martin Luther’s “solo scriptura”), eliminated many of the rituals and prayer styles that led people into this numinous space where we connect with the divine. The emerging movement is trying to recover this, in some cases by returning to ancient practices (ex. Lectio Divina, Christian meditation, Walking the Labyrinth, Centering Prayer) dating back to times when understanding God (and defining God) was not as important as experiencing God. In some cases, it leads to incorporating facets of Eastern Christianity (Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and Asian) where experiential elements are prominent. This scares many people who are rooted in practicing their faith in a very well defined, consistent (although possibly stagnant), and comfortable fashion. But to many of us, having the permission to explore traditions outside of our own that may deepen our experience of God is exciting.

A frequent accusation leveled at the emerging movement is “relativism”, a perception that one can believe anything, thereby diminishing its legitimacy as a Christian endeavor. If that is the worst criticism, I’ll take it. Those surrounding Jesus denounced him in the same way. He broke down all barriers that separated people into acceptable and unacceptable classes, whether those barriers were religious, political, or through social convention. The religious and ruling elite found this unacceptable. It is no great surprise that the religious elite of our time would feel any different. People always fear that which they perceive as a challenge to their authority. It is not true that members of the emerging community hold no firm beliefs regarding Jesus or God. Through my personal faith journey, I have many distinct beliefs about how Jesus wants me to relate to God and others. But I also recognize that other very faithful people may through their exploration and experiences hold different beliefs than I do, and in as much as God is a mystery, I respect their beliefs, unless they are hurtful to others. Within the Emerging movement there is definitely a sense that asking the questions is more important than arriving at specific, orthodox (a fancy way of saying “correct”) answers. Jesus often said “blessed are the meek”. Sometimes he said it outright (Sermon on the Mount), and other times he implied it through blessing those who were meek (ex. children, the woman who gave her only coin at the temple). The meek are those who admit that they don’t have all the answers, but rather express a constant willingness to submit themselves to God’s agenda in the world as they can best discern it. Asking the questions is how we, both individually and as a church, can grow to meet the needs of our time. It is how our faith remains relevant, rather than stagnant. Be excited, very excited, that you have permission to question, to doubt, to explore faith that reaches beyond church protocols, precedents, and policies. Be excited about going on this journey with others who are passionate about discovering God’s will for themselves and our world in the 21st century.