

Phyllis Tickle famously said that every 500 years the church has a giant rummage sale. What she meant was that periodically we find ourselves in the midst of great change that necessitates that we dispose of old baggage that we're not using any more. The first 500 years was the birth and formation of the church itself, an outgrowth of the movement started by Jesus that itself was a reformation of Second Temple Judaism. The second 500 years started with the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire and the beginning of the Dark Ages, during which the monastic movement focused on preserving Christian tradition. Around the first millennium, the Roman church and the Eastern church split from each other in the Great Schism, the first of many—and 500 years later we had the Reformation, with new branches of Christian tradition, with different understandings of how people relate to God personally through direct prayer and individual interpretation of the bible. Every 500 years or so, Tickle says, there were tectonic shifts in the Christian tradition, resulting in huge changes of both understanding and of practice.

<http://www.westminsterauburn.org/blog/the-500-year-rummage-sale>

So now we're due for another giant garage sale, and it's no surprise because we are well aware that we're undergoing more tectonic shifts, the outcome of which we find ourselves unable to anticipate. We were just talking last week in Sunday School about Mara Bailey's observation of the drop-off in interest among students in institutional religion, something she's observed just since she's been here. Books have been written, as we all know well; articles abound; even the occasional public radio show covers the shrinking of the church. And I will tell you that despite the catchy headlines, nobody really knows what's coming and what we're getting rid of

in this latest garage sale.

So I find today's story about the building of the first Temple very poignant. The event itself is tainted by the fact that Solomon enslaved his own people to build this Temple. Also he built himself a palace that was a lot bigger than the Temple and took longer to construct, so Solomon isn't the picture of kingly piety that he was trying to project. However, this story is being told during the Exile, by Jewish scholars looking back at the splendor that had been Judah. Their Temple has been destroyed, they are in exile in Babylon, and to them, the institutional memory of the inauguration of the Temple is a memory of the greatness that once was. Solomon and all Israel sacrificed so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted. The poles were so long that the ends of the poles were seen from the holy place in front of the inner sanctuary. The presence of the Lord filled the house with a cloud so that the priests could not stand to minister. It was a Temple of superlatives. It was the best.

When they returned from exile, the next generation rebuilt the Temple, and later on various rulers added on and renovated it so that Solomon's first version looked pretty modest in comparison. But at its most splendid, the Temple was the object of Jesus' contempt, a structure that would fall because of the internal rot caused by abuses of power among the aristocracy. And indeed it did fall, and that first 500 years of the Jesus movement saw themselves as its replacement.

Coincidentally, one spark of the Protestant Reformation was also the building of an edifice for the glory of God, the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome. Around 1500, Johann Tetzel was charged with the responsibility for raising money for the basilica,

which he did by selling indulgences, notoriously claiming, “As soon as the gold in the casket rings; the rescued soul to heaven springs.” This egregious abuse of power, and the distortion of God’s grace that it implied, was one reason Martin Luther decided it was time to push back and have a frank and open discussion of the many ways the Church had gone wrong, with his posting of the 99 Theses on the Wittenberg church door. It’s come to stand for the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, and today is the 500th anniversary of that event.

Looking back, it’s clear that the Reformation had to happen, and that despite the considerable flaws of the Reformers, it was a good thing overall. Putting the Bible into the hands of the laity, broadening the responsibility for conversation about God, questioning authority in general—these are all good developments. But at the time I have no doubt it was not so clear. And even for the Reformers, it was not clear that their efforts would be productive.

Luther died in Eisleben, the place of his birth, bringing his work and life, in a sense, full circle. He preached his last sermon there after successfully negotiating disputes between several local magistrates. But only five people showed up for the sermon, and he was hurt and angry. He wrote a friend about the event, despairing over what he feared was a “failed” reformation. All that blood, sweat and treasure poured out for nothing, what a way to end your one wild and precious life.

At the same time that I’ve been thinking about the nostalgia for the Temple and Luther’s sense of failure, I’ve been grading World Religions papers. A surprising number of students chose to write about wabi sabi, the Japanese notion that imperfection is beautiful. The cracked pot mended with gold is an example of wabi

sabi. A bent and twisted tree is wabi sabi. A weathered, chipped painted surface is wabi sabi. I had offered that paper topic thinking that it would have limited appeal—that it was a little too artsy and subtle for most students. But I bet a fifth or more of the class chose that topic, and they wrote with surprising (to me) insight. Some of them tried too hard to connect it to what they'd learned about Zen or Daoism, and quite frankly they were often wrong. But their observations about the objects they'd chosen were very much in the right spirit, and often very sensitive.

And that seems important. Martin Luther preached his last sermon to only five people, and thought he'd failed. But he hadn't; he had forgotten that much of our energy is always given over to failed endeavors and that the failure isn't necessarily the end. The insight of my students suggests to me that they have an eye for the beauty in imperfection, and they are spiritually responsive to the ambiguity of a damaged object. What they were able to say about the objects they'd chosen was far more intuitive and wise than what they could say about the tenets of the religions, which is no reflection on the religions, but confirms to me that these not-very-religiously-literate people are in fact *very* sensitive to awe and poignancy and ambiguity and all the feelings and experiences that we have religious language for.

I do not know what the aftermath of our giant institutional garage sale is going to be. I suspect it will involve the breaking down of distinctions between religions, which will be distressing to some. But people are spiritual beings; they won't stop being that. What we can do, together and individually, is to draw attention to that which inspires awe, or is mysterious to us, and in that way keep the spiritual pilgrimage open and always inviting to all comers, who will certainly be

coming from places we never expected.

Let us pray:

Dear God, the splendor of Solomon's Temple was, perhaps in the eye of the beholder, but that is still real splendor. The Reformers of the church did not always know how to do the job you had given them, but from their efforts we have reaped amazing gifts. Give us eyes to see your mysterious splendor wherever we are, and to remember that our failed endeavors are, by your power, vehicles for life-giving transformation.