

## May 17, 2025: Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Good morning!

As we heard last week, Pastor Lauren+ is out of town tending to her father, and we hold her father and family in our prayers.

With Lauren+ traveling, we have opportunity to return to worshipping the beautiful Morning Prayer service, and I have opportunity to share a few thoughts on the readings, the world, and St. Luke's. Thank you for listening.

The title of this little homily is "Phenomenology and the Great Emergence". Or, if you prefer, "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine." For those of you not familiar with R.E.M.'s song of the same name, I recommend it to you.

I'm glad we began today's readings with Peter's revelation, which I think is on par with Saul's dramatic transformation we followed two weeks ago. I like today's passage because it represents a dialectic progression that raises Peter and the church to the next level in God's grace and God's plan for us.

I call it dialectic process because it is one of give and take, tension and resolution, that ends with something better. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. This transformation process is a universal pattern and we have all hopefully experienced it in many shapes and forms.

**Musically, the pattern resonates profoundly, as Ildar can illustrate.**

In our reading from Acts, we see Peter's transformation in this process:

- a. Thesis: "I know what God wants of me. Nothing profane or unclean may enter my mouth."
- b. Antithesis: "Get up, Peter; kill and eat. What God has made clean, you must not call profane."
- c. Synthesis: "God gives even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life. Who am I that I could hinder God?"

The synthesis, or resolution, is that God redefines for Peter the categories of clean and unclean, which becomes a theological breakthrough: Gentiles are not to be excluded from

the community of faith. This experience brings Peter and the church one step closer to God's Plan, whatever that might be.

Of course, sometimes this process doesn't go smoothly. In Peter's case, he must go around *three times* with God Almighty before it sinks in. Eventually, of course, Peter gets the message, grows to the next level, and knows "the Spirit is telling me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us."

I think of moments like these as stepping stones in our evolution. Peter's old notion of the world dies and is replaced by something new and better, which leads to nothing less than God's Holy Spirit descending upon the Gentiles.

This incremental evolutionary journey of understanding has been described by many philosophers, theologians, mystics, and rock stars over the centuries. This process can be seen in the micro level for individuals (like Peter, Paul and the Caesareans ), at a meso level like for the Church, and a macro level in humanity as a whole.

Let's look next at the incremental evolution of the Church. According to Phyllis Tickle, who was a profoundly influential voice in American Christianity, the church has been undergoing radical transformations every 500 years in its form and formulations.

In her seminal work, "*The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*", she outlines four major upheavals in Christian history:

1. **The Great Transformation** (around the time of Jesus)
2. **The Fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of monasticism** (around 500 CE).
3. **The Great Schism** (around 1054 CE)
4. **The Protestant Reformation** (around 1517 CE)

**And finally, The Great Emergence:** where we are today, in this very moment of time at St. Luke's and the world.

Rather than my attempting to paraphrase her message, let me read her own words from a 2010 interview about the subject...

**Q. What is the Great Emergence?**

***Tickle:*** The Great Emergence refers to a monumental phenomenon in our world today that affects every part of our lives—religiously, socially, culturally, intellectually, politically and economically. The world is changing rapidly, and in so many ways, that we can hardly keep up with it.

In the religious sphere, many people have observed that these kind of changes seem to happen every 500 years—a period of upheaval followed by a period of settling down, then codification, and then upheaval again because we do not like to be codified.

For western Christianity, the Protestant, or Great Reformation was about five hundred years ago. Five hundred before that you hit the Great Schism, when the church divided between east and west. Five hundred years earlier you have Pope Gregory the Great, who helped bring the church out of the dark ages.

During these 500-year episodes the church has what Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer calls a giant rummage sale—it takes a look at its old stuff and decides to sell what it no longer needs. We are going through this kind of giant sale today.

### **Q. What happens to the church during this giant rummage sale?**

***Tickle:*** During these times of rearrangement and upheaval, the institutionalized church throws off things that are restricting its growth. When that mighty upheaval happens, history shows that at least three things always happen.

First, a new, more vital form of Christianity emerges. Second, the organized expression of Christianity, which up until then had been the dominant one, is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self. During the Protestant Reformation, both the reformers, and those they are reacting against, ended up being better churches.

Finally, every time the incrustations of an overly established Christianity is broken open, the faith has spread dramatically, thereby increasing the range and depth of the church's reach. Following the Protestant Reformation, Christianity was spread over far more of the earth's territories than had ever been true in the past.

Every religion is subject to becoming encrusted and institutionalized over time. It appears to take the Abrahamic faiths—Christianity, Judaism and Islam—about 500

years before people rebel and seek reform. When that happens, new and vigorous expressions of faith break out, breaking the molds that have held them and scattering the pieces.

**Q. What are people looking for during this Great Emergence?**

**Tickle:** *People are looking for a new and different encounter with God. The strength of Protestantism was its rationalism—it took religion to the head. But today people want religion that also touches their hearts. It’s not anti-intellectual; mind and reason are still very important. But people want more than just an intellectual challenge. They want something that moves them emotionally, as well. It is bringing the heart and the head together.*

Tickle goes on to say that the “*The future of faith lies in the investigation and the intimacy and the welcoming of the Holy Spirit.*” We are on schedule and right in the middle of another 500-year transformation, and this is leading to a deeper understanding and reconciliation with the Holy Spirit.

I think that these massive transformations in thought and attitude represent a similar dialectic process to what we saw with Peter’s incremental waking. We start with one set of assumptions, we encounter an alternate – even opposing – viewpoint, and we resolve to a deeper understanding. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

Make no mistake, these transformations have birth pangs that are neither trivial nor easy. They can bring upheaval, discomfort, discord, suffering, and an end to the world as we know it. And yet, by the grace of God, they resolve into a new world that is wider than we knew.

Ildar, to help punctuate the point, could you portray these massive transformations musically.

Finally, lest we think these modulating pitches and elevating key changes can only be seen at the micro-individual or meso-institutional level, we should consider the macro level of humanity as a whole. Are we as humanity going through continuous and evolving upheavals leading to a greater understanding and state of being? You betcha.

My good friend Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a profoundly influential 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, asserted in his Phenomenology of Spirit that mankind is evolving in

discreet phases over our history. The reading is a little dry and I won't go into details, but I will give you the spoiler: the culmination of collective evolution in consciousness is what Hegel calls "Absolute Knowledge".

When humanity's consciousness has collectively moved through all the stages of development and has reconciled all the contradictions encountered along the way, we finally reach "Absolute Knowledge", which is a total, self-reflective understanding of reality as a dynamic, interconnected whole. We are fully integrated into reality and transcend the limitations of finite experience; We are no longer separate from the world, but rather full members and participants of an omnipresent Oneness.

We and all things become a unified choir: Angels, sun, moon, and stars praising from the heavens; sea monsters from the depths; fire and hail, snow and fog, tempestuous winds rejoicing in His will; kings, queens, young men, maidens, and the loving community of St. Luke's, all raising our voices in praise.

That, I believe, is where we are headed. Although saints, apostles, mystics, and a few Caesareans might get there early, we're all in this together and will all get there together, by the grace of God.

And what does that look like when we as individuals, church, and humanity are fully embraced and enfolded with the One God? Our lector today has already shared the vision:

[Ildar –playing something softly to accentuate this reading]

*I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*"See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them as their God;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away."*

*And the one who was seated on the throne says, "See, I am making all things new. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."*

In the meantime, here we are at stalwart, courageous, loving, and plucky St. Luke's during the Great Emergence. What can one little church strive to do in the middle of the upheaval around us? Our lessons today make it clear:

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- Follow the Spirit, go to those in need, and make no distinction between them and us.
  - Keep asking ourselves, "Who are we that we should hinder God?"
  - Praise Him with all the universe from the heavens, the earth, and the deeps.
  - And Love one another just as Christ loves us
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Let us pray:

*O Lord God, Creator Redeemer and Sustainer, look with love and compassion on St. Luke's and all the world as we seek to know and do your will in changing times. Send forth your Word, o Lord, and fill us with your Holy Spirit. Transform us, Lord, and open our eyes to a new heaven and a new earth where we will truly be your people.*

*Amen.*

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