

**Mirror, Mirror**  
**Eglinton St. George's United Church**

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**January 24, 2010**

Once upon a time,  
A long time ago  
And in a galaxy far, far away—  
There were two great temples.  
One was named Eglantine,  
And the other, St. Gorgeous.  
And the temples were near to each other,  
And they were rivals from of old.  
It came to pass that both temples fell on hard times.  
At the temple called Eglantine,  
A faithful remnant gathered within crumbling walls  
Through which the wind blew.  
The danger for St. Gorgeous seemed less,  
But its seers foresaw only decline,  
And here too the telltale sound could be heard  
Of wind blowing in through cracks in the walls.

And so it was that the two rivals  
After much deliberation  
Joined their futures together.  
This was a common practice,  
And almost always failed.

But this time  
It succeeded.  
And the marriage that resulted was extraordinary.

Why was this?  
Perhaps it was because they chose a name for their temple  
Which was a marketer's dream:  
Fresh and forward-looking,  
Tripping easily off the tongue:  
*St. Eglantine and All Gorgeousness,*  
SEG for short.  
Or...perhaps not.

Perhaps it was the teaching

Of a charismatic and complicated leader—  
*Ron*—  
who called them to a ministry of  
“Open Portals  
Spacious Mental Functioning  
And Vacant Cardiac Atria.”  
(It loses, perhaps, something in the translation.)

Perhaps it was because the two rivals  
Learned hospitality by extending it to *each other*.

Or perhaps it was because—  
having grown to *like* the sound of the wind  
Blowing through their buildings  
And having learned to savour its freshness on their cheeks—  
Because of this they built their new building  
With spaces specially designed  
To let the Wind blow through....

It's time, perhaps, to let the allegory go.  
But I'd like to continue to hold up a mirror—  
*Mirrors* rather—  
To see this community of ours,  
As is has been and is now.

Another mirror.  
I just happened upon a sermon,  
Preached to this congregation  
On January 24, 1999—  
Exactly 11 years ago today.  
This is what we heard:

“Talk of the internal struggles we are experiencing  
is now coming out into the open,  
though unfortunately not always in helpful ways.  
It seems that in this New Year  
We are not only fortifying old loyalties,  
But we are creating new divisions  
Around which new loyalties can be formed....  
Our body,

This one body called Eglinton St. George's  
Is being dismembered  
By both open and concealed warfare.  
It's being hacked up into little pieces."

Are you staggered, as I am,  
Both by the dangers we then faced,  
And the amazing grace that delivered us from them?  
(And here it must be acknowledged  
That those many of you  
Who came neither from Eglinton nor from St. George's  
Are a large part of that deliverance.)

Another mirror.  
Not long ago, we were invaded  
By a group of earnest and intelligent students from Emmanuel College.  
They were in a class called "Best Practices",  
And they were investigating what made *us* work.  
They attended worship for several Sundays,  
And they subjected Connie and me  
To two hours of remorseless grilling!  
We asked if we could sit in on their class  
When they made their presentation on ESG.  
And so we went, in fear and trepidation.  
At the end, we were invited to respond.  
"It sounds like a wonderful place," I said.  
"I'd like to work there!"  
It wasn't a shot at the church;  
It's just that I was a little embarrassed  
By the extravagance of their praise.

Two things they said particularly struck me.  
The first is a little thing, but telling.  
They had been here on a "Jazz Sunday".  
They asked one of you—I don't know whom—  
Whether she liked jazz.  
The answer made me very proud.  
"Not really," she said,  
"But I support it completely,  
because so many others really appreciate it."

You may think that this kind of gracious generosity  
*Should* characterize the church, and you'd be right.  
But if you think it always *does*,  
Then I'm afraid you've been hanging around ESG too long!

The other was this.  
Like good theology students,  
They tried very hard to pin down our theological "complexion"—  
Were we liberal or conservative?  
Inquiring minds wanted to know!  
I'm afraid—not true!—I'm delighted  
That we defeated them....  
They finally decided that we had an unspoken agreement  
That theology would *not* divide us;  
That living together in loving community  
Was too important  
To be jeopardized by the usual arid squabbling  
Of liberal and conservative.  
And I believe that they were in large measure right,  
But also that this is only part of the answer.

I have been thinking a lot about this,  
Partly because of some recent discussions around here,  
And partly prompted by my own reading.  
As someone raised in a fundamentalist church,  
Now happily ensconced in a very different kind of church,  
I have always thought that the battles of liberal and conservative—  
That old "Dance of Death", as a scholar of my acquaintance once called it—  
Were singularly unfruitful and, well, unchristian.  
Do you remember the letters page of the Observer?  
Until quite recently, it seemed sometimes to consist  
Largely of this:  
Letters from one camp saying, essentially,  
"You people aren't *real* Christians!"  
and from the other saying:  
"You people certainly are *stupid!*"

It seems as though this has gone on for ever.  
But Karen Armstrong, in her book *In Defense of God*  
Reminds us that this is not so.

Fundamentalism and liberalism  
Are *both* products of the Enlightenment.  
So excited were our forbears  
By the early achievements of the scientific revolution  
That they began to read *everything*—  
Including the Bible—  
As though it were a scientific treatise.  
In doing so, they forgot how Christians for 1500 years—  
And other people for millennia—  
Had read their sacred texts.  
Would it surprise you to know that St. Augustine,  
Commenting in the 5<sup>th</sup> century on the Genesis creation story,  
Observed that, since its literal meaning  
Did not accord with what was even then known about the universe,  
It must of course be read as poetry, as metaphor,  
As what we might call *myth*?  
A thousand years later,  
On the cusp of the modern age,  
A Cardinal gave birth to this dry little clerical witticism:  
The Bible, he said,  
Taught us how to go to heaven,  
Not how the heavens go!

We tend to think that Fundamentalism is ancient,  
And that Liberalism is modern.  
But they are both modern,  
Both children of the Enlightenment,  
Both utterly dependent on one another,  
And both the result of a quite recent amnesia  
About how, and why, sacred texts should be read.  
I know there are fans of Bishop Spong here;  
But I'm feeling brave this morning:  
As far as I am concerned, both Spong  
*And* Pat Robertson  
Are fundamentalists—  
Fundamentalists of left and right—  
And *neither* reads the Bible with the slightest ear for poetry.

The good news is that modernity is passing away,  
And something new is coming to birth.

The *interesting* news is that Eglinton St. George's is, I believe,  
Further down that path than most of the church.  
Why?

I think it's because we have,  
Without fully realizing it,  
Become a new kind of church—  
A "*Practicing Church*".  
Diana Butler Bass and others  
Have described how this new kind of church  
Has become the locus of vibrant new life  
In the allegedly withering mainline denominations.

Again we must go back to the Enlightenment.  
Not only did we forget how to read Scripture,  
We forgot the real meaning of religious belief.  
"I believe" came to mean  
"I assent to certain propositions."  
This is not what it meant through most of the church's history.  
Our English world "believe"  
Is related to the German word "liebe"—to love.  
When earlier Christians said "I believe",  
They meant "I stand with",  
"I pledge allegiance to."  
They meant it the way a loving spouse  
Might offer encouragement:  
"I *believe* in you!"  
(Note that this is *not* assent to the proposition  
That the spouse does indeed exist!)  
"Believing", someone has said, "is *beloving*".

But at the enlightenment  
Christians began to lose this understanding,  
And to see themselves primarily  
As those who assent to certain propositions.  
And, course, if everything depends upon propositions,  
Then everything depends on accepting the *right* propositions,  
And holding them with the *right* degree of fervour.

Practicing congregations seem to have intuited

That this will no longer work—  
If indeed it ever did.  
Practicing churches say  
To be Christian is not about accepting propositions.  
To be Christian is to *do* what Christians *do*.  
And a church derives its unity  
Not by enforcing belief,  
But by inviting its people into those *practices*  
That form us into people of faith.  
“Liberal” and “Conservative”  
Become largely irrelevant:  
The “Dance of Death”  
Dies.

What are these practices?  
Some of them we’re quite familiar with--  
Worship, the reading and study of Scripture,  
Music as faith-expression,  
Prayer, contemplation,  
Working for justice, peacemaking.  
Others, like hospitality or simple living  
Seem more rooted in the everyday.  
Still others have been reclaimed after a long interval—  
Healing ministries, the keeping of Sabbath,  
The giving of Testimony.  
You may recall Lillian Daniel,  
Rob’s thesis supervisor,  
Who preached here so brilliantly a couple of years ago.  
At her church, Testimony has become a central practice,  
And members of the congregation routinely get up on Sunday morning  
To share stories of God’s work in their lives.

Like Lillian Daniel’s church,  
Practicing congregations seem often  
To have one or two practices  
Which are particularly important to them,  
In which they “specialize”.  
At Calvin Church, Zelienople, Pennsylvania,  
Which I visited last summer,  
It’s healing.

At Holy Communion Episcopal in Memphis,  
The Celtic liturgical style of the Iona Community  
Is used to create worship which is deeply contemplative.  
At Goleta Presbyterian in California,  
Their dominant practice is “diversity”,  
The creative and intentional embrace  
Of diversity as sign and sacrament of God’s nature and activity.

At the same time,  
A web of practice becomes for these congregations  
The whole pattern of their lives.  
The aim, as Brian McLaren says,  
Is to restore a kind of sacred normality to the rhythms of life—  
“Making prayer ordinary in our daily schedule. . . ,  
Making generosity habitual,  
Making regular time for rest. . . ,  
Practicing simplicity instead of consumption. . . .”

Can you see how we are moving,  
Stumbling, perhaps,  
Into something very like all of this?  
Think of the things we do—  
Think of “Yoga and Meditation”,  
Taizé,  
Wellness,  
Music,  
Peace with Justice,  
Pilgrimage,  
Even Reel Theology and Final Fridays!  
In these and many other ways,  
We at Eglinton St. George’s are embracing practices  
Designed to give a sacred pattern to our lives  
And form us into a people  
Both older *and* newer  
Than the children of the Enlightenment that we have been.

Thinking of ourselves as a practicing congregation  
Explains so much about us:  
Our vitality,  
Our refusal to be divided by what begin to seem like trivial differences,

Even that sense that many of us have,  
That we're not *quite* an ordinary church—  
That something new and interesting is coming to birth here.

If I'm right, then I think it's time  
We became more conscious and intentional about practice,  
More curious about what it might mean for us,  
More interested in others—  
And they're in all the mainline denominations—  
Who are on the same path.

Above all, let's not miss the Voice  
Speaking to us the same word  
That came to Israel through the prophet Isaiah:  
"See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the desert  
And streams in the wasteland." Amen.