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Pentecost Sunday

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. will be posted in a written form and also an audio form as part of a devotional service on www.firstcommunitychurch.com.

Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:1-4
Mark 1:1-8

“I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:8)

“We have passed through the age of God the Father, the revelation of God in Israel. We have also passed through the age of God the Son, the revelation of God in Christ Jesus and the church. We are now entering into the age of God the Holy Spirit, when people will discover God within themselves and the church will fade away.” (Joachim of Floris)

Today, Pentecost Sunday, is the eighth and final Sunday in the Easter Season. Throughout this season, we have been focusing on scripture passages that describe Jesus' post-resurrection encounters with Mary and the other women by the grave, his encounters with the disciples in the Upper Room, by the side of the lake, and also on the road to Emmaus. We have seen how the disciples needed to let go of Jesus in his human form that they might rediscover him in a new form (a form that is not a form), as the Holy Spirit. We have emphasized how important it is for us that we not only let go of the human form of loved ones who have died, but that we open our hearts that we might rediscover them within us and in the world.

Joachim of Floris is a relatively unknown theologian whose teaching concerning the evolution of God or at least the evolution of our understanding and experience of God is absolutely profound! At least I think so. The church, specifically the Roman Catholic Church, as we shall soon see, has taken quite a different position.

Joachim was born in 1132; he died in 1202. As the abbot of a monastery in Floris, he carried on the monastic revival that had been championed by Bernard of Clairvaux. Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, describes Joachim as “endowed with prophetic spirit,” and he places him in *Paradiso* next to the great Franciscan, Bonaventura. It is only within the last century, however, that Joachim’s works have been published, but I believe that the depth of his theological insight has yet to be fully appreciated.

In 1202, Joachim published an eschatological philosophy of history entitled *Treatise on the Four Gospels*. It was eschatological, having to do with the “last days,” the predicted end of the world. If we read Joachim’s thesis as having to do with the literal end of the world, it becomes just another misguided prophecy. I believe it is more enlightening when we understand it as having to do more with the stages of spiritual development than the Gregorian calendar, when we consider the possibility that Joachim’s thesis speaks to the evolution of God in human consciousness.

Joachim’s understanding of the scriptures came to him as a sudden insight one day while he was studying the Book of Revelation. “Suddenly,” he says, “the eyes of my spirit were enlightened, and the fulfillment of this book and the harmony between the Old and the New Testaments was revealed to me.” I like that expression: “the eyes of my spirit were enlightened.” The hidden truth given to him was that, just as the age of Moses had been replaced by that of Christ, the age of Christ must give way to the age of the Holy Spirit.

Joachim made three basic points. First, the history of humanity unfolds in three stages: the first is the age of God the Father; the second is the age of God the Son; the third is the age of God the Holy Spirit. His second point was that the clerical or institutional church is a manifestation of and is limited to the age of God the Son. Third, according to his calculations, the Bible foretells the end of the age of the church in the year 1260.

As we listen to his description of these stages, let us think of them not only historically, in terms of the evolution of the Judeo-Christian religion over the past 5,000 years, but also spiritually, as ages or stages in our own understanding of God, in our own spiritual journey, in our continual discovery and rediscovery of God in our own lives.

Joachim says we have passed through the age of God the Father. This was the revelation of God to Moses as a masculine, patriarchal, law-giving deity in and through the Ten Commandments and the other laws that guide our conduct. What was important during this age or stage of history was the nation of Israel, that people whom God chose to be a “light to the nations.” This age came to an end with the birth of Jesus.

The second age is the age of God the Son. This was the incarnation, the revelation of God in the human Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom we believe to be the Christ, the Logos or Word of God. This was an evolution in the revelation of God. The Law and the nation of Israel was no longer central to our understanding of God, for now we had a picture of what God looked like in human form. The church came into being to preserve the teachings of Jesus and to proclaim his message, to witness to Jesus as the Christ. In this second age, the church was very important.

On the basis of his religious experience and his reading of scripture, Joachim believed that the age in which he lived, the age of God the Son, was coming to an end. He predicted that when the age of God the Son comes to an end and the revelation of God evolves into the third stage, the institutional church will become increasingly unimportant or irrelevant.

Based on Joachim's calculations, the age of God the Son was to end in the year 1260. This date was to usher in the age of God the Holy Spirit, when people would discover God within themselves and, according to Joachim, "the church would fade away." The institutional church of his day, not surprisingly, found this teaching annoying!

The great mythologist Joseph Campbell once described myth as a story that may or may not be literally, historically true on the outside, but, as a teaching, on the inside, it is profoundly true both psychologically and spiritually. What if Joachim's prediction was not literally, historically true, but symbolically and spiritually true? As recorded in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples he has to leave them, or the Holy Spirit will not come to them. He tells them his time with them in human form as Jesus of Nazareth has to come to an end so that they can find him, discover him, experience him in a new way--as the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit will be present within them and within the church. He tells his disciples "It is to your advantage that I go." Jesus intended his personal revelation of God to give way to or be superseded by the revelation of God in or as the Holy Spirit.

Joachim said that when we experience God as the Holy Spirit, when we experience God within us, we will no longer need the church. The church of his day, not surprisingly, found that teaching annoying! If he were not such an important figure in the monastic movement, the ecclesiastical authorities would have silenced or killed him. It is believed that Joachim was an important influence on St. Francis of Assisi.

The church of Joachim's day had set itself up as the gatekeeper, as the only way to Christ and, therefore, the only way to God. If there were no way to God except through Christ, and if there were no way to Christ except through the sacraments and teachings of the church, then you would need to be a part of the church in order to be saved. There could be no salvation outside the church.

I think that many or most of us who identify ourselves as Christian would agree with Joachim's first point: that a special revelation of God occurred in and through the nation of Israel. We would also agree with his second point: that this revelation of God evolved in and through God's incarnation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, that the testament Jesus brings is the New rather than the Old Testament; the covenant that he brings is the New rather than the Old Covenant.

I would like to point out that we do not have to view Joachim's thesis as an either-or proposition. For example, think about who or what you picture when you pray. To whom do you address your prayer? Obviously, many Christians picture and pray to God the Father. Some people, including many Roman Catholics, address their prayers to Mary, to a feminine side or face of God. Many Christians picture and pray to God as we see or experience him in Jesus; some, like me, talk to Jesus more than pray to him. Some address their prayer to the Holy Spirit, to a sense of the divine presence within them. It is more a matter of finding this focus of our faith within us rather than outside or in a remote period of history.

The church came into being to preserve and proclaim the gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The problem is that it set itself up as the gatekeeper to God, the only way to God. Whereas the original gatekeeper was Israel, as expressed by Naaman in 2 Kings 5:15 when he said, "there is no God in all the earth except in Israel," this position was soon occupied by the church. The Roman Catholic Church, in its doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, still maintains there is no salvation outside the church.

I agree with Joachim; I think Jesus wants us to think past our focus on the church. Just as he did with Mary and the disciples, he wants us to discover him as a living reality and presence in our lives. He tells us that the focus should be on discovering the Holy Spirit within ourselves, in the church, and in the world. If we can do this, our religious faith and our understanding of ethical or moral issues can evolve in keeping with the complexity of our times.

The Protestant reformers wanted to take the church out of the central spot of our relationship with God. They believed that place should be reserved for the Bible. They believed the Bible, not the church, should be our guide to understanding Christ and God. They believed the Bible should be printed in a language that common people could understand, and that everyone should be able to read the Bible on his/her own. Just as with Joachim three hundred years earlier, the church found this annoying. They didn't like losing the power that went with being the one and only way that people could get to God.

Joachim would probably believe that the Protestant reformers made the same mistake as the Catholics. They put the Bible, the testimony of the early church, in the central position.

Joachim, even though he lived three hundred years before the Protestant Reformation, took this one step further. Joachim said that the Holy Spirit should be the center of our faith. This is because he believed that the Holy Spirit gave rise to both the church and also the Bible.

The Holy Spirit not only created the church but leads us to continually reform it, helping it be true to its calling, leading it back as often as it departs from the path, especially when it becomes an end in itself. The writing of the scriptures was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to interpret scripture, to enable the teachings of the Bible to evolve and come alive to us in our time.

Joachim had an interesting point. He said that God's revelation has evolved or unfolded in three stages that correspond to the three people of the trinity, that it has progressed from God the Father to God the Son to God the Holy Spirit. The experience of God has evolved from the experience of God as a tribal warrior God, the God of Israel, to the God of Jesus, to the God of the church, to the God whom we find within as the Holy Spirit. Where I think Joachim missed the boat was in the conclusion he drew about the church. Joachim believed that when we discover the Holy Spirit within us, when we discover our personal relationship with God, then we will no longer need the church, and the church will fade away.

The church does not need to fade away, but *it does need to redefine itself*. It needs to stop thinking of itself as the gatekeeper to God and devote its resources to helping people develop their own personal relationship to God. The church should help us discover God and Jesus *in our own lives*, help us to experience the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, and serves as our guide through the difficult and confusing journey of life.

When we think of the implication of Joachim's teachings along these lines, we can see how important the church becomes. The church becomes like a school. We might be able to learn how to read and write, to do mathematics, to obtain not only an education but also an educated outlook on life without ever setting foot in a school, but it would be very unlikely to do this or to do it well all by ourselves. I also don't know why we would want to do it this way when we have schools, books, and teachers that are set up for this expressed purpose.

When we strengthen our church through the sharing of our gifts, we strengthen the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, in our own lives, and in the world. Let's prove Joachim wrong! We don't want his prediction to become a reality! We don't want our church to fade away! We want it to become even more strong and vital, to grow and evolve that it might continue to be a fitting container for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as individuals and as a Christian community!

As we journey forth as twenty-first century apostles, and as we journey forth as a twenty-first century church, God grant that the light planted deeply within us will never go out, and that we will find ways to share the healing power of this precious light with a wounded and darkened world.