

Holy, cognitive dissonance

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, May 15, 2011: The Fourth Sunday of Easter.
Based on Acts 2:42-47 and John 10:1-10.*

In the early 1950s, a suburban Chicago housewife, one Mrs. Keech, announced that a message transmitted to her by an automatic writing from another planet indicating that the earth would be destroyed on December 21st, 1954. By the time that date arrived, she had built a group whose members not only believed her prophecy, but had acted on it. Taken real action. Things like leaving college, jobs and spouses to be ready to be rescued by a flying saucer in advance of an earth-destroying flood.

When the 21st of December came, Mrs. Keech and her members gathered together. It was a long day and night and as the hour of midnight approached there was a minor debate about whose watch was accurate. And then it was the 22nd of December. Mrs. Keech began to weep quietly.

Like other mistaken prophets before her and like the man at my subway stop will feel next Saturday—he's been bearing a sign saying the world is going to end on the 21st of May—such disappointment can feel like a stab in the heart. But in this case, the pain didn't last too long. Within weeks, the little group actually increased its membership and its commitment to its cause. Happily choosing now to believe Mrs. Keech's new revelation, also delivered by automatic writing: the aliens had been so impressed by the group's dedication that they decided to save the world instead.

Now imbedded in that little group in 1954 was a scholar, Leon Festinger, who had been impressed and fascinated by the commitment of Mrs. Keech and her adherents. And he took to attending the group and talked his way into the inner circle, assuming of course, that the prophecy would not be fulfilled. As an observer, and out of that experience, he developed a now widely-held theory called cognitive dissonance.

He defined it as the uncomfortable tension that comes with holding or, in this case, being forced to hold two conflicting opinions at the same time. He theorized and observed that when dissonance becomes uncomfortable enough, people will change their behavior or change the conflicting thought or justify their behavior by adding a new thought.

Now I'm taking a big risk by beginning with this story and the idea of cognitive dissonance. But I know now that I can trust you not to jump to conclusions, and I can also trust this sturdy congregation to rise above anything like unimaginative literalism that gives both thinking and religion a bad name.

Because this is indeed the end to the first reading today. The classic text from the second chapter of Acts of the Apostles. Let me remind you what it says, "Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers." That phrase is said to be so characteristic of the essence, the ideal of Christian practice, that it is quoted verbatim in the Baptismal service. It's the question we answer and affirm at our baptism.

The writer continues, "Awe came upon everyone and because many signs and wonders were being done by the Apostles." And then this, "All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need." Day by day as they spent much time together in the Temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God, having a good meal with the people.

Now that is a radical vision, thrilling or ominous depending on your point-of-view. But that's the end of it. Five verses in Acts 2. This is never mentioned again in Acts, in the Gospels, in the New Testament. It's just not there.

It's a picture of pure socialism. Small s generic socialism or communalism or communism in which the living faith meant to give up private ownership and to share. It even advocates "giving as any had need." That was a concept that was put into words in the early part of the Industrial Revolution, picked up and now quoted and attributed to Karl Marx himself. "From each according to his abilities to each according to his need."

And there was more: in this egalitarian faith society, “they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

What an ideal vision: sharing, study, fellowship, eucharist (breaking of the bread), and continuity in “the prayers,” indicating the continuing practice of regular times of prayer, as their Jewish heritage had taught them.

But this ideal simply disappeared. It's been observed that the book of Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome. And that's where Christianity was marching. By the fourth century it had become the religion of the Empire. The top-down authority of the emperor dictated that Christianity would get in bed—literally—with the systems of the day. And to this day, that is where we live. Not by that radical vision of living in common and holding all goods in common, but by holding ourselves above.

The cognitive dissonance became great enough that we changed our thinking.

I'm not saying that's a bad thing. As a matter of fact, I'll go this far. I'll make a theological statement. I believe that this may be a clue as to how God actually works. God works through the real lives that we live not the ideals that we might hold up against the threat of being hypocrites.

What might have worked at one particular time for one early Christian community of three thousand or fewer members is evidently not workable on a global scale. The reading makes no reference to the means of production or the production itself. Once the goods were merged, some given away, who produced what, and how? How does the human community feed and clothe and house itself?

So, the cognitive dissonance, the adaptation to actual life, to reality may just be a clue as to how God works in our lives.

Just how difficult it is to live any ideal, is starkly revealed three chapters later in the Book of Acts. In the only other reference to this method of sharing everything in common, a new member, Ananias, arrives. A person of means, with the collaboration of his wife Sapphira, he sold his property and gave it to the church—except that, as they soon discovered, he kept a chunk of it for himself. He was disgraced, brought to trial in front of the community, and when the verdict was rendered, dropped dead on the spot.

That's the end of that little experiment. You won't find it any place else in the New Testament.

But there has been a progression, an honest struggle in Christianity over this business of sharing, though not always an edifying one. There are no perfect answers, but maybe this is the way the church has learned about sharing. Maybe this fleeting vision reminds us that if the rap against us is hypocrisy, then our accusers apparently have read one snapshot, one little picture of how the church is supposed to be.

In the end, we learn that faith is not about being right. It's not about finding an ideology or program and adhering to it. And it is certainly not about never changing your mind. Faith is about stopping the noise and the certainties of your heart and mind long enough to get a glimpse of the reality of God. It's about becoming part of what God's doing.

Christianity has not and does not claim to know the world is ending. Instead we intuit that the adventure continues, maybe is only beginning in this wink of time that is our life.

God and God's many followers down through the ages have changed minds and tactics many times—enough so that the work of sharing in common has taken many forms. We have faith that we'll find forms of sharing that work for a global village, not just for a group of likeminded believers of 3,000 or fewer, 20 centuries ago.

We have faith that by sharing, thinking, studying, staying in fellowship, saying our prayers, and above all breaking the bread in Jesus' name at a table where all are welcome, is the cognitive dissonance the world needs now more than ever.

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