

Syncretism...For Christ's Sake

There are lots of different types of sermons being preached all over the world this morning. The goal of these sermons might be one of the two "C's" - to convict or to convert. My goal this morning is a third "C". The third C is an invitation to consider. My hope is that in considering, you and this church and other churches in the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ will begin to enter into some reality based discussion regarding the state of Christian religion in our culture and from those discussions Christ might begin to work through us so that Jesus' message that the Kingdom of God is in our midst would be a current reality.

The title of today's sermon is innocuous enough for most of us...."Syncretism...For Christ's Sake". I want to share straight up that in most environments of theological and religious conversation, syncretism is a word with negative connotations almost bordering on heretical thought. So let's go into it, shall we? After all, denominationally speaking we tend to be pretty good at looking at Christian orthodoxy and bumping up to the edges with evolutionary thought that pushes boundaries. That is what the DOC and the UCC does and I am so grateful for a religious environment that supports and encourages this.

So what is syncretism, you ask? I'll read a definition or two and then we can chat a bit more about the specifics.

From vocabulary.com we have this definition.

syn·cre·tism/'siNGkrə,tizəm/

noun: **syncretism**

1. the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.

2. Linguistics the merging of different inflectional varieties of a word during the development of a language.

Origin

early 17th century: from modern Latin *syncretismus*, from Greek *sunkrētismos*, from *sunkrētizein* 'unite against a third party,' from *sun-* 'together' + *krēs* 'Cretan' (originally with reference to ancient Cretan communities).

That doesn't sound negative at all, does it? Well that's because those who are writing the dictionary don't have an "opinion" about the "amalgamation of different religions, cultures or schools of thought". But if you were part of a religion, or had a strong cultural affiliation or were educated in a discipline of a specific school of thought such as Jungian psychology, you might have a very strong opinion about changing that, right?

From this little book: The "Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms", the definition says: *The attempt to assimilate differing or opposite doctrines and practices, especially between philosophical and religious systems, resulting in a new system altogether in which the fundamental structure and tenants of each have been changed. Syncretism of the gospel occurs when its essential character is confused with elements of the culture. In syncretism the gospel is lost as the church simply confirms what is already present in the culture.*

Now that starts to sound like someone wrote that definition that has an "opinion", doesn't it? What I want to assert today is that opinion is wrong and holding to that opinion too tightly is killing the church. And if it is killing the church, then it is killing Christ in this world all over again. And that is not OK with me and I hope it is not OK with you either.

-----

What are some examples of syncretism in religious life? Well, we might argue Jesus was the original syncretistic...or at least was the catalyst for a syncretistic movement...or at least his disciples were. What was Judaism in Jesus' day became something else and as that something else evolved, it became Christianity.

I know this is obvious, but it never ceases to amaze me to repeat that when Jesus was alive, and for many years after the crucifixion and resurrection, there was no such thing as Christianity. Today, we have many different denominations of Christianity with different interpretations and practices all under the label "Christian". That kind of different interpretation is not unique to Christianity or religion.

During Jesus' time, there were many competing Jewish sects. There were the Pharisees, the Sadducees and Zealots and the Essenes. Jesus' teachings became a sect which led to Christianity, but for many years there was no such thing only a sect of Judaism which recognized Christ as Messiah and began incorporating and integrating other cultural and religious thoughts and practices under this new "way".

Historians continue to debate the precise moment when Christianity established itself as a new religion, apart and distinct from Judaism. It is difficult to trace the process by which the two separated or to know exactly when this began. Jewish Christians continued to worship in synagogues for centuries. Some scholars have found evidence of continuous interactions between Jewish-Christian and rabbinic movements from the mid- to late second century CE to the fourth century CE. One writer (Philip S. Alexander) characterizes the question of when Christianity and Judaism parted company and went their separate ways as "one of those deceptively simple questions which should be approached with great care."

But what is abundantly clear is that Jesus and his disciples were syncretists.

In the gospel of John Jesus is quoted as saying this:

*<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.*

*<sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."*

<sup>25</sup> *The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things."*

<sup>26</sup> *Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." (Jn. 4:23-26 RSV)*

I recently saw a Facebook post that was a cartoon of Jesus talking to the Pharisees and he said: "The difference between me and you and me is you use Scripture to determine what love means and I use love to determine what scripture means."

Both the scripture example and this cartoon are reflections of the importance of function over form. Who cares if our music is different or our order of worship changes or \_\_\_\_\_ (insert your favorite sacred cow here!)?

What is the goal or objective of preaching each Sunday morning, and by extension, what is the goal and objective of the church in our lives?

I like Rick Warren's (Saddleback Church) description of what he thinks the goal of preaching is. He lists an assumption (speaking for God), and then follows with the objective or goal. Let's give Rick the benefit of the doubt and say we believe his assumption (despite whether we can ever really "know" that or not). The assumption Rick says is: "God's objective is to transform us into total Christlikeness". From that assumption, the objective follows: Quoting Rick again:

*If God's objective for every believer is to transform us into total Christlikeness, then the objective of preaching is to motivate people to develop Christlike convictions (to think like Jesus), Christlike character (to feel like Jesus), and Christlike conduct (to act like Jesus). Every other objective of preaching is secondary.*

*At the end of the sermon, if people aren't being transformed in how they think, feel, and act, I've missed the mark as a preacher.*

*To put it another way, the ultimate goal of preaching is not information. In fact, giving people a greater knowledge of the Bible can cause pride to develop in our hearers*

*rather than humility if that information isn't translated into obedience. And the goal if preaching is not merely instruction either. Preaching certainly includes instruction, but there is more to preaching than mere behavior modification. The goal of well-rounded preaching is transformation and obedience.*

*If we preach with life transformation as our goal, then the result will be believers who are more obedient to the Bible, and we call obedient believers disciples. Just look at the challenges Jesus gave as He taught people—He continually expected people to do something as a result of hearing Him.*

I like that very much....as far as it goes. The end of Rick's quote talks about believers being more obedient to the Bible and I would assert that is not as easy as it sounds because almost everything in the Bible must be interpreted and that interpretation is never removed from our particular cultural and religious milieu...that is...meaning where we live. You might want to discuss that point further, and I'm happy to do that at any time, but if that is true that everything in scripture is an interpretive exercise, then how do we do that? I don't want to be obedient to the Bible...I want to be obedient to God...the God partially revealed in Scripture and partially revealed in the small amount we know about Jesus and partially revealed through a myriad of other ways. Many of those "other ways" of partial revelation are through what we generally call culture...that is, the environments of our daily lives...the dirt and "terra firma" under our feet. There is a lot of beauty and wisdom to be had there and I think we need to integrate God into all of the dirt more and more, not less and less. So how do we accomplish this?

There are ways and I want to offer a few of them now. These are not formulaic or prescriptive in the sense that there is only one way to do this, but I will talk a bit about some things to consider. As a start point, I'd like to offer something I have been trying to live into for the past 20+ years. It was written as a weekly recall in the church where I am a member, but I have used this as a reflection point and a basis for action and implementation and it has been helpful to me.

### **Meditative Reflection:**

It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day seeking in grace and praise to discover God's will for our lives on a daily basis. As part of that discipleship, we also work to increase our love for one another. We move earnestly toward tithing to our church that the Kingdom may increase its resources. For the same reason, we try to tithe our time and our conversation. Finally, we hope that our faith and love and discipline increase until they flow beyond our fellowship and become a blessing to others.

---

Embedded in this reflection are several "steps" we can take to allow God to more fully enter into all of our lives....the sacred and the profane....the lofty spiritual pursuits and the dirt under our feet and in our hearts. I'll get to the steps shortly, but at the heart of all of this is the willingness to surrender to God and turn our lives and will over to God's care.

What does this have to do with the current state of affairs of Christianity in our culture and culture in Christianity or more succinctly put...what does this have to do with syncretism? I have my own assumption I would like to put forth for your consideration. At the risk of preaching to the choir, I am asserting that the Christian church (generally speaking) and the Disciples of Christ-DOC and United Church of Christ-UCC (denominationally speaking) and Church of the Foothills (specifically speaking) are critical....crucial...vital to the future well being of our neighborhood, county, state, nation and world...in that order! We start local and move out, just as in our relationship with God we start within ourselves in personal connection with the God of creation and move out to our families, workplaces, neighbors and beyond. Any attempt to do it otherwise will backfire and will not be sustainable.

I also want to assert that we need to get back to some of these basic orientations if we have any chance in participating in God's plan for the continued redemption of the world. For over 180 years the DOC and for over 60 years the UCC has seen a continual decline in membership and the trend does not appear to be changing

anytime soon. This downturn in membership is true of every mainline Protestant denomination. For those who are outside of our church walls, the response is “so what?” For those of us inside, I ask “why are we declining”. Declining in membership and impact and relevance. For younger Christians I talk to, the church is not connected with their lives in any real and meaningful way. And that is one way I think we are missing the boat.

Part of the issue is there is no one thing called “Christianity” to which we can claim uniformity. There are over 215 Protestant denominations in the U.S. and Canada alone. It almost seems like whenever there is some doctrinal or theological disagreement the next step is: “Let’s start a new denomination”. That’s not fair, I know...maybe a little too flippant a comment...I am glad people take their religion seriously. But it does speak to the difficulty to be a voice for something in a sea of lots of other voices. Some are especially vocal voices and some are very quiet. We tend to be relatively quiet compared to some others. Two years ago, UCC Minister Lillian Daniel published a book entitled: *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don’t Belong To*. The subtitle is: *Why Rigorous, Reasonable, and Real Religious Community Still Matters*.

I highly recommend this book for those who want to begin thinking about how we might be positive agents of change for increasing God’s relevance in our lives and in our families lives and beyond.

This topic is well worthy of a far more full discussion and I would love to present some additional ideas and strategies of how we might begin to invite some of these changes at another time. For today, at the risk of great oversimplification, I would say we have been denominations and churches that have been at the front of the lines for justice in an unjust world. That quest has led us collectively be part of many wonderful changes, as we have become a more tolerant and loving culture, which is true, despite whatever news cycles we listen to. And yet this year the church in general, and our churches in particular (DOC and UCC) will be a smaller voice and

influence than last year, smaller than the year before that and the year before that...and on and on. Why?

We should be asking that question over and over...and not just ask it of each other. How about asking God why? What a novel concept! If Rick Warren's assumption of God's objective is true...then why not ask God how I am to be more Christlike in my thinking, feeling and acting?

How do we do that? We can start by getting back to the Meditative Reflection as a guide.

1. Pray Every Day (there are specific and helpful ways to pray and some that are less helpful...not wrong, just less helpful).
2. Study Scriptures each day. Personal scripture reading is wonderful; Bible Study as a group is critical if we are to "reason things out with others" in ways that help us to become more Christlike.
3. Build up the church organizationally with investment of our time and talent and money. "Moving toward tithing" is a concept of great power. Many in our day use the word "tithe" and "offering" or "gift" interchangeably. But just to be clear, a tithe is 10% of your income given to God. Anything less is not a tithe. If every church member evaluated their giving patterns, whatever those giving patterns were and made some diligent effort to increase the percentage of giving each year, each of us would be transformed and our church would be transformed. I have seen it happen; and I have seen it lost.
4. Once we are filled and centered and connected to God and being personally transformed, we allow God's overflowing and abundant love to "flow beyond our fellowship" and we look for ways to bless others outside of our immediate community.

If we adopt this reflection as a “grounding point”, there are many things that will flow out of this orientation. And ultimately, as more is revealed to us, more is demanded of us to be in the world...to allow Jesus’ assertion that the “Kingdom of God is in your midst” to become a reality. To do that, I believe we need to surrender over and over to God’s will and be willing to act if we are directed. And so, I offer this prayer as part of your reflection as well.

**Prayer:** God of all creation...my prayer this day is for a clear understanding of your will for me in the situation (name the situation). If you make it clear to me, I will obey. Grant me the strength to follow your path made clear to me.

These are some of the “personal” prescriptions of transformation and growth. If each of us are on this path personally, and we invite others into this transformational life and share it with each other...each and every day...not just on Sunday or not just at Christmas and Easter, then God’s relevance becomes personal and real and church becomes not a place where I go, but I become church. We don’t go to church, we are the church...the ecclesia...the gathered people of God.

### **Each Generation’s Responsibility for Faith**

You know what I love about Jesus? Well, there are a lot of things I love about Jesus, but one of the most exciting things about Jesus is he accepts and welcomes us as we are, but he never leaves us were we were when we first meet him. We are continually transformed. The spirit of Christ is with us this moment and creation is continuing to unfold and we are participating in that creation story...on an individual level and in community with others. This church is in a continuing creation story and that is exciting!

Real life, real situations and real events are connected to God and God is connected to all of it in inextricable and profound ways. The more connected we get; the more

in-tune we are with God's frequencies, the more we will recognize God's role and impact and we will be transformed in ways unimaginable.

I had one of my own epiphany ah-ha moments just this week. I was changed, not by prayer, or scripture study or any other "religious" event. My change came from an Instagram post. But if I did not have orientation and framework as a backdrop...a lens through which I view my life...my epiphany might have a far different outcome.

Kathy and I have four children...29, 27, 25 and 17. Our youngest is a volleyball player who just finished her fourth year of high school volleyball and will be playing in college next year. Well...her post was a photo of her on the volleyball court, looking downward at the floor smiling, with her hands almost as if in prayer. And her caption read: "and just like that...it's over". She went on to thank everyone for all the great times, instruction, encouragement and memories. Of course, for me as her Dad, I know her and love her and know how hard she has worked to be a great player, teammate and role model to other girls in the sport. And when I read "and just like that...it's over" ...well, I cried a bit. What a bittersweet and wonderful reflection. She is right...that era...that time...its over. If I pondered that from a worldly only perspective, I might get caught up in some form of nihilism, which is the rejection of all religious and moral principles in the belief that life is meaningless. But because I have some sense of God's purpose and rhythms, the "over" does not equate with meaninglessness, but elevates the notion of what is now as sacred and something to which I want to devote myself to wholeheartedly with passion and purpose. What a difference!

God was in that Instagram post...and God is in all facets of life, even when we don't pay attention to it. That simple post, from a daughter I love...from a daughter who loves God...from a daughter who loves life...that post has changed me because God is changing me. I have a new plan I think God is giving me. Last week, I didn't have it....this week I do. You never know what can change in a "New York Minute".

I think there is plenty of change available for all of us. What about you? Do you want to be transformed to be more Christlike in your thoughts, feelings and actions? How will you do that today; this week; this month?

In our scripture reading this morning, Paul wrote:

<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

That sounds like a good use of syncretism to me. To what end?

Paul also writes in 2 Corinthians:

<sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:10 RSV)

And lest you think that is the end of the story; we have this promise. From **Revelation 21:5** And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." (Rev. 21:5 NRS)

May each of us become a new creation...this day and in all the days that follow.

Amen.