

The Underground Church

Building a Beloved Community of Resistance.

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 May 2016

Common Dreams on the Road Seminar - The Underground Church

By Rev Dr Robin Meyers

Hear the You Tube version as you read – follow the link on the Sunday Reflections page at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/>

Let me begin with the words that begin the prologue of my book: “The Underground Church”:

First the bad news: the church of Jesus Christ in the Western world is in terrible shape. Mainline churches are dying on the vine. Cathedrals in Europe have become museums. A whole generation has written off the church as hypocritical and obsolete. The Catholic Church has been shaken to the core by widespread sexual abuse of children by priests and wounded itself even more deeply by covering up the crimes. Organized religion in our time is reeling from a lack of credibility. .

Yet humanity’s spiritual impulse remains. It is hard-wired into our brains as we seek transcendence in the midst of impermanence. Millions now call themselves “spiritual” but not “religious”—because they no longer trust the church as an institution. In fact, the very definition of the word faith itself is in crisis. The faithful are not so faithful anymore. They suffer from what the French philosophers called *la douleur de voir trop clairement*—the pain of seeing too clearly.

There are many reasons why people still go to church, of course—the power of social convention, childhood guilt, the need to associate with like-minded people, and even the deep and irrepressible feeling that life must be about something more than private ambition sustained by self-medication.

Don’t we need to go someplace where we can escape all the small talk about celebrities, sports, or who gets voted off the island? We know that human beings need communities. But in all honesty, we have to admit that many, many people head to church on Sunday morning expecting little more than to bear to cross of boredom. They know that on Sunday morning they will listen to too many announcements, hear a sermon that might help them cope, but seems safely disconnected from the real world, and hear music that they would never listen to in their car, much less crank up and sing along to.

As churches wither on the vine, they often try to save themselves by rearranging elements of worship without realizing that nothing on the surface of church can compensate for the deeper identity crisis that leaves us wondering what church is really all about to begin with. This will sound harsh, but I suspect, after all these years as a pastor, that very few people really expects anything important, much less dangerous, to happen at church. We expect nice things to happen, but not subversive things.

Nobody looks over their shoulder these days on their way to church to see if they are being followed. Nobody passes around sermons in sealed brown envelopes to keep them out of the hands of the CIA or the FBI or the Department of Homeland Security. Christians are not on anyone's no-fly list. Subversive is the last word that comes to mind when someone mentions the church.

Fred Craddock my preaching professor in seminary. One day he told a story in class that I have never forgotten. He would just be lecturing and then just break into a story – we had no idea what it meant until it soaked in. He said this... .

Some time ago, I was out in the yard and saw a sparrow walking down the street. I took a second look because, well, the sparrow appeared to weight about nine pounds.

I said, "What are you doing walking?" He said, "I'm trying to get off some of this weight off." I said, "Well, I did notice you're kind of heavy. Why don't you fly?" He said, "Fly?" I said, "Yeah, why don't you fly?" He said, "Are you crazy? I've never flown before." I said, "Really?" You're a bird and you don't fly. What's your name?"

And the nine-pound sparrow said, My name is, "Church."

After 35 years of ordained ministry, I know exactly what Craddock meant when he described the church as a nine-pound sparrow that is afraid to fly. Most congregations today are both fearful and allergic to risk—so much so, in fact, that they are afraid to do the very things that might make them relevant again.

In The Underground Church, the question I pose is simple, but for me, it is compelling: *"How did we get this way when clearly we did not start out this way?"* It used to be a very radical, very counterculture, very dangerous thing to be a follower of Jesus. So, to return to our analogy of the nine-pound sparrow, who clipped the wings on what was once a white dove? Who domesticated what the first Jesus People called The Way until it became what Harvey Cox called a "compliant acolyte" of the Kingdom – the Empire? How did this Beloved Community that brought so much joy to people who had never known it before turn into a joyless and often fearful defender of the status quo?

I have come to believe that what diminished the power of the church was that it so quickly – sort of devolved from a way of life and love into a belief system that satisfies our desire to be right without making any of us, (no matter how doctrinally sound), into better human beings. Once we were noncompliant communities that threatened the Roman Empire, now we are completely absorbed into an Empire of our own.

Now the Underground Church has a signature text Now I grew up learning this in the church and I thought it was perhaps one of the most harmless things Jesus ever said in the Bible: *Heaven's Imperial rule is like leaven that a woman took and concealed in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.* (Matthew 13:33).

I know, not very exciting right? Sounds harmless! I mean, if you are like me, you learned this in Sunday School and thought it was perfect for – say – a meeting of the Ladies Guild – something about making bread. But did you know that this is the only utterance of Jesus in the N.T. to have received all red votes by the Jesus Seminar? Meaning, that they were more certain that this was an authentic utterance of the historical Jesus than any other.

So, this “one-liner,” or similitude, comparing what most commonly translates “Kingdom of God” with a woman making bread, is thought to be Jesus of Nazareth at his most subversive. You’ve got to be kidding?

I again this ditty, together with the story of the mustard seed in Sunday school. I thought it was a no-brainer, obvious enough for the average third grader: out of humble, even hidden origins can grow great and powerful things—which we all knew was just a metaphor for the church. We started off small but then grew into something great, just like the mustard seed grows into a great shrub (and then in Matthew, miraculous into a tree). Likewise a pinch of yeast causes a large amount of bread to rise. This is lovely. Just lovely.

But like so much of the gospel now buried beneath layers of uncritical sentimentality, the true meaning of this little parable has been lost across a chasm of time, language, culture, and what John Dominic Crossan calls “*the drag of normalcy*.” This text occurs in both the gospel of Thomas, and is also, scholars believe, in Q, which means that it is independently attested to in two of the earliest Christian documents.

But because the parable’s language is so heavily influenced by the King James Version, words like “leaven” and “three measures” remain difficult for most of us to understand. Most translators do not know what to do with the idea that the woman “hid” the leaven in the dough, because the Greek does not seem to make sense here. So they have the woman either “mixing” or “kneading” the dough, which makes more sense to us. As for “three measures,” a modern listener may also miss the significance here, even though it is a very large amount of flour (about 50 pounds).

To the ancient listener, however, the connotation would have been obvious and unmistakable. A first century Jew would hear an echo of the words of Genesis 18:1-8, when Abraham’s three “visitors” are provided hospitality, and he went to the tent and said to Sarah, “*Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.*”

These three angels, one of whom is Yahweh, come as part of the prophecy of the birth of Isaac, an idea so fantastic that it made Sarah do what? Yes, she laughed. So when their impossible child was born they named him Laughter (which in Hebrew is pronounced Isaac).

So this is a parable that recalls the improbable if not the impossible, and to make it more subversive, the agent is a woman - the agent is a woman who hides the leaven. So it’s a subversive act of love by a powerless person. Well, we think, there still doesn’t appear to be anything all that radical about a woman baking bread. It’s what women did in those days – they baked bread. They still bake bread. But as the symbol of the sacred activity of God, it is highly problematic. Indeed it would have been a scandal.

What’s more, the Greek words used for hiding, or concealed, is *krypto* (in Luke) or *enkrypto* (in Matthew) both have negative connotations. These are the root words from which we get our English word *encrypt*, known to all computer users as the verb form of our word “*encryption*,” or to keep secret by means of a code. It is how we send information we wish to protect. The more important the information, the more important it becomes to protect or secure it—in short, to hide it. When we encrypt things, we hide them.

The phrase “until it was all leavened” speaks of the process by which leaven works on dough until everything is “corrupted.” Once set in motion, the outcome is both inevitable and irresistible. But why would scholars refer to this process as “corruption?”

That word has negative connotations in English, but isn't a large quantity of bread quietly rising to feed a hungry world a good thing? To our ears it is. But we are not first century Jews. In the ancient world the process of leavening frequently stood as a metaphor for moral corruption. The Jews, after all, did not celebrate the feast of the leavened bread, but of the feast of the Unleavened Bread.

In their defining event, the children of Israel escaped Egypt by taking their dough before it was leavened. To celebrate Passover, Moses gives very specific instructions about who can partake of the feast of the unleavened bread, and he forbids the eating of leavened bread. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory. In short, all leavened bread had to be cleaned out of the house.

Leaven makes bread rise, of course, but it also makes it rot. It makes it swell, just as a corpse swells due to fermentation. That's one reason why, in the New Testament, corpses were such a powerful source of impurity in the time of Jesus--hence the negative power calling some Pharisees "*unmarked graves that people walk over without realizing it.*"

If you are looking for a little scriptural evidence that leaven has negative connotations in the New Testament, I've compiled a few brief texts. I came out of the Non-Instrumental Church of Christ, When I was a kid, we had to prove everything with the text - so here you go: Jesus warns the disciples concerning the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod (Mark 8:15). They had just asked Jesus for a sign (a miracle, which he refuses to do), and such a request corrupts the whole enterprise. Matthew refers to the "*leaven of the Pharisees*" as their teaching (16:12) while for Luke it is their hypocrisy (12:1). Paul twice quotes the proverb, "*A little leaven leavens the whole lump*"— once in Galatians to warn against a person who is demanding that they be circumcised (5:9) and again in his first letter to the Corinthians when he refers to the "*leaven of malice and evil*" and contrasts it to the "*unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*" (5:8).

So I think we get it. Leaven had serious negative connotations at the time Jesus spoke that little parable. Leaven is what those who study rhetoric (and that was my PhD work) call a "trigger word"—a word which almost guarantees an immediate, predictable response from the audience. So, for example, in our time, in America, we can assume a negative reaction among a liberal crowd to the phrase, "*military-industrial complex*" Boo! Or "*corporate lobbyists*" or, *Donald Trump*. Mega mega mega boo! Among a more conservative crowd, however, the trigger words are "*tax and spend,*" (boo!) or "*big government,*" (boo!) or that dreaded word "*socialism.*" (Mega boo!) And, come to think of it, Donald Trump actually works here also, because he, I think is offending as many conservatives as liberals! So – we've never seen anything quite like him.

Here is another helpful analogy. Most of us in the United States have heard this proverb, "*one rotten apple spoils the whole barrel.*" This may come closest to explaining how a first-century Jewish audience would have heard the word "leaven."

Today we might speak of a virus, either the kind that affects the body or one's computer. But the effect of a virus is still negative out of all proportion to size, and once it begins it cannot be stopped.

So what appears at first to be a harmless little parable is in fact a scandalous one. Understood in its original context, it captures the essence of what I believe must be a movement to return the church to its subversive roots, "corrupting" if you will what is corrupt in the world.

What this woman is doing – hiding this leaven - is a model for what the church ought to be doing. We should be neither dissuaded by the odds, nor naïve about how long it's going to take before the "corruption" is complete. Our job in the Beloved Community is to take action against the odds, to resist the forces of death and indignity that are served up daily by the Empire, by hiding the corrupting agent of love in the loaf of that Empire—by hiding this subversive love and once the process gets started, the Empire won't know what's infested it until it's too late and we can trust that we don't have to finish what we start, we just trust that our love is infectious and can start a process which is irresistible and powerful out of all proportion to size.

You will know that you are beginning to corrupt the Empire, however, when the Empire starts pushing back, feels that it has this virus gnawing at it, and starts to inoculate itself against your your non-compliance, by trying to cut you out by labelling you as an American Australian or un Australian or heretical, or even, as Bernie Sanders was called yesterday, "unelectable." Yes, they don't want Bernie Sanders elected, so he becomes unelectable. This is how the Empire does chemo. Much Empire chemo is done with 24-hour cable news networks. It is perhaps one of the great ironies of our time that you exported Rupert Murdoch to us – we would like for him to come back – have his visa expire or something – come back here because you don't want him either. Herod the Fox has a modern network named after him!

Now, granted, you may never have considered ministry to be even remotely similar to corruption but stay with me. I also know that the whole idea of fermentation is a little creepy to most people. But its how we get wine and beer, right? And Ben Franklin said that beer is proof that God loves us. So not all forms of rot are rotten. Mouldy bread, after all, gave us what?

Penicillin. If you are a gardener, like my wife Shawn, then you know the value of compost. Let me tell you my friends, if I am caught throwing away any organic material - coffee grounds banana peel, if I try to slip 'em in the trash, I'm in trouble. "All organic material Robin . . . "goes into the compost pile." "Let the fermentation begin."

Odd as it sounds, I think the church is often too clean, too well appointed, too much like a suburban McMansion with a big cross. Older people still respect it, while most young people ignore it, but nobody considers the church in our time to be a threat to anyone in power. We are threat to each other, as we continue to argue over who has the correct doctrine or recites the right creeds—but as we busy ourselves with church debates over such weighty matters as whether the kids should be able to eat pizza in the parlour, or if they drop one of this little pepperonis on the new carpet, or what shade of white to paint the sanctuary (there's lot's of different shades of white, you know. You need a committee!). While we're doing that, real people in the real world are starving to death.

So let me ask you this – when was the last time you saw the church significantly challenge the status quo instead of just defending it? In my lifetime, in America, it was during the Civil Rights Movement. Of course we still pass lot's of resolutions at our national meetings to condemn all manner of evil – racism, homophobia, Islamophobia – but what happens to those resolutions when the vote is taken and ministers return to churches that are struggling just to survive? One of my UCC colleagues recently described us as a church that was once revolutionary; now we are "revolutionary."

And here's the thing. The Empire does not mind our pronouncements, they do not mind our hand-wringing, our social media campaigns—so long as they do not interfere with commerce or invert the power structure. They know that in the end righteous indignation without direct action is a bargain. Let me say that aging: The Empire knows that in the end righteous indignation without direct action is a bargain. They know we need to “blow off steam.” It proves that we live in a “in a free country,” and that “democracy works.” Then they can return to business as usual, and for the Empire, business as usual is the Good News.

In the Underground Church, however, we have Good News that comes in the form of Bad News. It is good news to all those who have been left out, but it is bad news to all those who have designed the world around a closed table.

For starters, we need to work on our language, replacing the word “faith” in our worship liturgies with the word “trust.” Trust in God. Faith is hopelessly tied up with belief systems, but the word trust implies leaning in to what we imagine is possible even without the self-righteousness of certainty. And when we finish reading from the Bible, instead of saying, “*This is the word of the Lord*” (when we may, in fact, have just finished reading some awful passage about God sending bears to maul those little boys who mocked the prophet of God, or ordered Joshua to commit holy genocide – it's a little unsavoury to say “this is the word of the Lord), we might consider saying, “*These are our sacred stories.*” *Grant to us, wisdom and courage for interpretation.*”

We need to ban phrases in the church that are intellectually satisfying but existentially impotent. I don't want to hear about “paradigm shifts” anymore; I'm just so tired of that! I want the church to be one. And let's not confuse ministry with hyper- individualistic navel gazing. There is a thin line, sometimes, between spiritual practice and self-absorption. We know this! God is not our personal trainer or cosmic life coach. And the prosperity gospel - which is so strong in the southern United States - where God helps you get rich, is a complete aberration; it is the anti-gospel.

I am fond of saying in my own sermons that in church we talk a lot about the Good News, but we need to bring back the Bad News that the Good News implies. And I don't mean by this scaring people with hellfire or making them feel worthless as the damaged goods of Original Sin. I'm not talking about that at all. Rather, I mean to suggest that the gospel is not neutral energy; it is not infinitely malleable like play dough. The gospel has an inherent politic; not partisan politics, but rather the politics of the gospel. God is neither a Republican nor a Democrat, which is an absurd idea anyway, but rather God is a Householder who wants everyone in the house to have enough.

Consider the way we tell the annual Christmas story. We love the poetry of it, of course, but who thinks of a Christmas pageant as subversive? Dangerous? Or the nativity as a kind of spiritual apocalypse. Just once (because I am twisted this way), I would like some subversive Christian education director to rearrange a few lines in the annual children's Christmas pageant. With apologies to the writer of Luke's gospel, here is what I want to hear, just once . . .

Be afraid, be very afraid--for behold I bring most of you Bad News of a Deep Sadness that will come over many very important and powerful people. For to you this day is born a subversive saviour, who will be leaven in the loaf of the Empire. A teenage mother has hidden this yeast in the midst of scandal and obscurity. By the time you find out it will be too late, and you will one day wake up to find yourself surrounded by three measures of God's corruption.

I'm always just re-writing the Bible! On my tombstone when I die, it's going to say: "Robin Meyers – he paraphrased the Bible..." Anyway, I just like to do it, because I'm a preacher and the language gets tired against our year. So let's just go on and get even crazier and do the same thing with Matthew's Gospel to see if we can make it a little more real:

When King Herod heard this he was frightened (and all his minions pretended to be), and so he called an emergency meeting of his hand-picked executive board and ordered up some intel on the exact location of the birthplace of the future leader of Occupy Palestine. Then he sent Seal Team Six to Bethlehem on a mission to pay homage—in fact that was the name of the mission: OPERATION HOMAGE (which sounded better than TORCH THE MANGER). But lo and behold, somewhere between the palace and the sight of Mary huddled in bloody rags, the men defected, and to this day there is a bounty on their heads. Herod was heard to mutter, "left for their own country by another road", my ass!

You can do this. This is fun. Now imagine what the audience might do? People might put down their cell phones and camcorders long enough to say, "What version is that?" Or consider what might happen in an Easter sermon if the preacher announced not Good News, but Very Frightening News I bring you this day! Just once in church, I have this fantasy that some preacher will have the nerve to say, on Easter morning, not, "He is risen!" but, "Oh no, he's back!"

What I am saying is that the church is dying because it seems to have run out of its own surprises. Because at its best the church should be a kind of spiritual counterinsurgency.

So let's return to the parable of the leaven one last time, to consider the Greek word that we translate "kingdom of God." It is *basileia*, from which we get the English word *basilica*, which was the Roman word for a very large public building. In the ancient world it had to do with royal administration, so the *basileia* essentially stands as the symbol of the Roman Empire itself. And to say the least, such rule was not benevolent. It was the *Pax Romana* (the peace of Rome) that was the great gift of Augustus to his people. But as you all know, "It was only *pax* if you were *Romana*. Otherwise it was *oppressio*, oppression.

So one more time, let's try to get our minds around this apparently harmless parable of the underground church. I think it means something like this: the empire of God is like moral corruption that a woman took and concealed (she acts subversively) in three measures of flour (an amount so large as to signify an event as significant as the birth of Isaac) until it was all leavened (see –they're coming for us already!) until there is enough for everyone. She begins the process by which distributive justice will one day be realized, and the messianic banquet will be served. Just imagine: enough for everyone.

This is why the church must be not just a community of care and compassion that's good, it should be! But it should also be a community of noncompliance with the principalities and the powers. It must be subversive for the cause of love, a community that resists, that pushes back, sometimes in a way that is almost hidden, until more and more of the Imperial loaf is leavened.

When people ask me where I came up with the title, "The Underground Church", the truth is I borrowed it from the American phenomenon of the 19th Century, the Underground Railroad, that vast network of people who helped fugitive slaves escape to the North and to Canada before the Emancipation Proclamation. This was the church being subversive by doing what is right even before it was legal. Which was why in my church, we married same sex couples long before we could give them an actual licence.

In the 19th century, one prominent church in Brooklyn, Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, whose pastor was also American most famous preacher of the time, Henry Ward Beecher, had a trap door hidden in the sanctuary where slaves who had escape and made it to Brooklyn on the Underground Railroad were brought up onto the chancel in the middle of the worship service and auctioned off to someone in the congregation willing to purchase their freedom. That, my friends, is the Underground Church!

What sets it apart from the hyper-polemical time in which we live, where the world is divided into winners and losers, The Underground Church movement does not insist that everyone have exactly the same theological orientation, or worship in the same style, or listen to the same music, or even be of one political persuasion. In the Underground Church, the only pledge one must adopt is this: **a disciple of Jesus is someone who is more interested in being loving than in being right.**

. . . Please let me brag for a moment, shamelessly, on the congregation in Oklahoma City where I have been the pastor for 30 years. We are not huge (about 750 members – about 60 when I got there), but Mayflower folks are like leaven in our community. As part of a new community organizing effort in Oklahoma City called VOICE (and by the way, the church needs to get involved in community organising). VOICE, for us, stands for Voices Organized in Civic Engagement, and you know what we do? On the Saul Alinsky model of community organising, we go out and have listening parties! We listen to people in the community, see what they're really worried about. Strangely, that despite what we often hear in the American media, the top three things people are worried about is NOT abortion, gay marriage, and gun control, but rather quality education, good public transportation, and access to affordable health care.

Mayflower started a before school art program in one of our city's poorest public schools – what we found out is that kids who were dropped off an hour and a half before school starts just ran around getting into trouble. So we hired an art teacher, got a room, invited those kids in off the street to sculpt and paint, instead of hanging out and getting in trouble.

We have dozens of reading tutors at Mayflower who meet weekly with students in the inner city who are not reading at grade level and we read with them for a couple of hours – called “With Kids”. It's a great program. Mayflower feeds 600 homeless people a month and provides them with all the essential supplies needed by people who live on the street (clothing, underwear, toiletries, coats, blankets, and for their kids, school supplies, backpacks, you name it). We call it the 363 group, because that's the number of days besides Thanksgiving and Christmas when people are in need.

At Christmas our homeless friends are given hand-knitted scarves, hundreds of them that have been knitted by men and women in our church who sit up in the balcony and do the knitting in the sanctuary during the Advent worship services. It is quite a sight to be preaching and look up there and see all these people knitting! I know that if it's a bad sermon, at least something good is happening – and then you see those beautiful scarves hung around the necks of the homeless who take real pride in picking a certain colour and in wrapping up others to take for a spouse or a friend. What colour would she or he look good in? It's just a little thing. Just leaven.

And here is how we avoid the argument that we don't have enough money to do missions if we want to keep the lights on. Our premise is that if we are not doing mission there is no reason to have the lights on—so at Mayflower, all of our missions are self-funded. And this is intriguing – makes people a little bit scary perhaps. None of the money for any of these projects comes out of the church's operating budget. You make a pledge to support the operating budget of this church and then out of your pockets you pay an extra for the mission of your choice. The thing that you're passionate about. And it works! We raise more money that way.

15 years ago, Mayflower established a remarkable and life-changing mission in the tiny mountain town of Jinotega, Nicaragua, where we staff and maintain a year-round medical clinic and boarding school to help correct hearing loss in children, some of whom have been abandoned in the market by parents who can't raise a deaf child. They often come to us without the ability to speak, and lack the most basic social skills. Some have never brushed their teeth or flushed a toilet (or seen a toilet). They come to live in a boarding school that we built with sweat equity and remodelled by members of Mayflower who go down 3 or 4 times a year so they can learn sign language and what it means to be a human being.

Ten years ago we bought a large abandoned house in Jinotega and have converted it into the Abergue Mayflower (literally the Inn of Mayflower) where we are trying to practice the ancient Christian principal of radical hospitality. This is a \$150,000 a year operation, all paid for in addition to church pledging by members and non members, doctors and nurses come from all over the country and they pay as well. We do ear surgeries, we have an on-site manager who speaks fluent Spanish and lives there all year round. We employ a staff of teachers, counsellors, and kitchen staff. We have opened a bakery run by locals, the rent from which supports the boarding school – and then we bring the bread home and serve it on the communion table. And that's very important to our congregation.

If you ever make it to this remote mountain town two hours north of Managua, you will see the name "Mayflower" all over the town. If you ask anyone about Mayflower, everyone will say "Yes, Estados Unidos, our friends in Oklahoma". Again, this costs \$150,00 a year, all of it paid for by people who love the mission. We don't tell people at Mayflower they should want to do. We just say: "find it!" So, they look at the 3 ring circus that is our mission program and they try to figure out which one of those rings they might want to jump into, or maybe they start a 4th ring and we turn them all loose. It's all bottoms up, it's all lay driven and, in that sense, it's very congregational and we don't have to go to a Bishop or run very many things through a committee. For God so loved the world that he did not send a committee.

Of course, we are still human beings, and so each group tends to think that's its particular project is the best project, the most Jesus-like, and my job is to tell each group that they are undoubtedly correct!

Here are two abiding gospel truths that I have learned by being a pastor for over three decades: 1) All families are dysfunctional (some just more than others); 2) and all human beings are deeply insecure (even and sometimes especially very accomplished human beings). But we all want to know that we count for something, that we are worthy, and to be encouraged in what we are trying to do to make the world a better place.

One of the ways that the church can distinguish itself from the dominant culture, where it's every man or woman for him or herself, is to be communities of encouragement. Letting people know that we appreciate them; we think about them; we remember them when they are passing through times of difficulty. That is, after all, what all of us want and need—to know that we live in one another's hearts.

I'm going to hazard a guess, after 30 years of parish ministry, that most people don't come to church looking for some kind of implausible cosmic bargain. But people do still come, and they are still hungry. We cannot protect you. They come not for all the answers, not be inoculated against misfortune, but to be exposed to the highly contagious notion that either all of us matter or none of us do.

It is remarkable to me that in church, of all institutions, there is so much resistance to change. Every pastor knows the Seven Last Words of the Church: We've never done it that way before. Yet the beloved community of the Jesus Followers was born doing things that had never been done before. If I have learned anything as a minister it is that most of the good that happens in a church happens when people move toward the mystery we call God without knowing how it's going to turn out. And most of the bad that happens in church happens when people move away from that Mystery, immobilized by fear and mistrust.

The Underground Church will be led by pastors who preach subversive sermons, like the ones that are preached here, and who are beholden to no one, and to nothing, save the truth spoken in love. A woman in my church recently dared me to preach an Easter sermon from the parable of the leaven. I accepted the challenge even though I was fairly certain that its never been done before.

Here's what I did. I thought about the fact that Empires are really in the body removal business. Rome knew that if you had a problem with somebody, all you had to do with get rid of the body. Especially if it was what we call today a "high value target." Make sure he's dead. In the case of Jesus, run a spear through his side and then put him in a big tomb and seal it with a big rock and post guards there all night long—or heaven forbid some other body will steal the body and then we'll have a cult of the risen body on our hands.

Thanks to the work of historical Jesus scholars, we know that by the time the church got around to writing the Easter story he had been dead for a long time, but apparently not to his followers. A movement had begun to rise almost immediately, fermenting in the loaf of the forgotten. It was nothing short of a scandal, these unclean people worshiping an unclean God. Not surprisingly, women had been the first to take action against the odds, claiming that the tomb was empty, and the risen Christ was now leaven in the loaf of his followers. The response by some was predictable. You know women—they get hysterical.

Still they refused to believe that every last ounce of leaven had been cleaned out of God's household. Strange as it may sound, the followers of The Way, as the underground Jesus Movement was first referred to, had initiated the reign of the unclean God (moving from religion as purity to religion as compassionate action among the unclean). What was flat and dead had begun to rise, and yet this seemed so improbable and counterintuitive that they wisely kept it hidden, sharing the news of the corruption with only a few. In the original ending of Mark's gospel, the real ending, the women have it exactly right--"they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were--afraid." Last word of the very first Gospel ever written.

At Pentecost, the theme of corruption continues—“*devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem*” under the influence of such dramatic fermentation that some of the unleavened people around them accused them of acting under the influence of fermented grapes at 9 o’clock in the morning.

I wonder if we have taken all of the danger out of Easter. Perhaps in the Underground Church, instead of just placing an exclamation mark at the end of every sentence in the Easter bulletin, we should at least respect the risks that follow from exposure to the resurrection as a kind of virus. When was the last time that an invitation to Easter services included a warning to those who might attend? Like a food label, something about one’s tolerance for corruption or spiritual fermentation? *Don’t come if you think you’re susceptible to this! It’s a secret underground meeting where we will make plans to help rot the Empire from within?* Now, I’d go to that church!

So to wrap this up and get to your questions, here are just a few ways that I believe that the Underground Church should begin its corruption. First, in the Underground Church, I believe that we should consider fundamental changes to the way we serve communion. Now we serve it only to those who are in attendance, and in some cases only to those who believe the right things. We have diminished the sacred meal, the Eucharist, down to a confirming ritual, an insider’s morsel for an insider’s blessing.

But once it was not this way. Once the Jesus People did food first, and not in symbolic form, not in these itty bitty things, but on a table heaped high with the riches that people had brought to the service. In a replication of the story of the loaves and fishes, a story that appears no fewer than six times in the gospels (the most often told story, by the way.) Jesus prays to heaven to bless the food, and by so doing pays tribute to the divine source of the food he offered, symbolically standing against the Roman Empire.

It is important to remember how food has always been used by those in power as a weapon. The emperors maintained their power by distributing bread to the poor. Jesus feeds the multitudes through a new ethic of sharing and in so doing replacing Rome as the true source of life. What would that mean in our time? How can we feed people again in our churches as a reminder that food is the basic human sacrament. Take, bless, break, eat. Food always comes first in the Beloved Community.

Second, in the Underground Church I think that the church must become again the centre of non-violence resistance to war in our society. We should proudly embrace the pacifist tradition which refuses to kill, and we should be the one place in modern American or Australian society in which the worship of the warrior does not occur. This includes legal and financial help for conscientious objectors, and protection for those who wish not to redeploy to the battlefield. Churches could again become centres of conscience, helping soldiers who find themselves in a crisis when they decide to lay down their arms. Now, this might get the church into a lot of trouble. One can only hope.

Third, the Underground Church needs to be a place of refuge again for both the stranger (who may be Jesus after all), or the loved one who has no place to lay his or her head. One in four houses in America is vacant at any given moment, and countless detached apartments, garage apartments, and studio apartments could be held open as a place of temporary hospitality. I know that there are real safety issues involved here, and some people could not take those risks, but churches should look at buying small apartment complexes that can be places of temporary shelter.

I built a studio apartment attached to my house and all manner of people have lived there, moving through various crises in their lives. My own kids have lived there before they could afford to live on their own. There are few things more urgently needed in our time or as profoundly Christian as being able to say to someone, “I have place you can stay tonight.”

Fourth, in the Underground Church I think that we need to find ways to create an alternative economy for those who are in covenant with the Community. We need to not only redistribute wealth through benevolence giving, but we need to seriously consider the ancient Christian practice of loaning money to members of the community at no interest for the purpose of securing shelter, paying medical bills, or escaping from the prison of debt. Few things are as oppressive or as shameful as the usury empire of the Empire (the credit card as master of our lives, the adjustable rate mortgage as a time-bomb, the pay-day loan industry – you know, where you borrow 200, pay back 700! It’s like a vulture circling over the desperation of the poor). And, if we want to be truly radical, we will seriously consider asking that churches NOT be completely tax-exempt, especially from property taxes, because in America, that’s how we fund our public schools.

In America, just six years ago (seven now I guess), the financial sector, including Wall Street bandits and banks considered “too big to fail” caused the most severe recession since the Great Depression. Millions suffered, not just in America but around the world, but none of those people responsible for that great debacle went to jail. So instead of just complaining about it, we need to provide a real alternative economy in the church whose purpose is not to make money, but to share the portable energy that money represents. This might also get the church into a lot of trouble. One can only hope.

Fifth, in the Underground Church, our children should be neither out of sight nor out of mind. They should be given visibility and responsibility in the life of the community. We should create rites of passage for Protestant youth. Not just confirmation or give them a driver’s licence, but something as significant as Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah in the Jewish tradition and First Communion in the Catholic tradition, because every young person in our midst ought to feel inescapably tangled up in a community that cares for them, so that decisions they make have community consequences, not just family repercussions.

Sixth, in the Underground Church we understand the importance of quality public education for the last and the least, and every church should adopt a local public school, learn what its needs are, and do something to help that school. It is shocking to walk the halls of some of our poorest public school today and confront the sad but simple truth: we care more about our sports stadiums than about our schools.

And finally, the Underground Church must confront the environmental crisis by suspending the argument about what’s causing it long enough to take the lead in sustainable practices. From the smallest changes, like less plastic and no Styrofoam cups, to organic lawn care and gardening, to driving smaller cars, electric cars and reducing our carbon footprint, to the church as an active recycling centre, to collective action by the congregation against forces that destroy the environment for personal profit and short-term gain. What other institution has the size or the influence greater than the church to practice life in harmony with the natural world? I live in Oklahoma City, the city that created a boom in oil and gas from hydraulic fracturing (or fracking) - and it created enormous wealth.

But, you know, we now have more earthquakes there than in any place in the world. In the little bit of Central Oklahoma where I live, six hundred earthquakes so far this year – caused by pumping trillions of gallons of chemical-laced water used to break up the rock and extract the oil and gas. They pump it back into the earth where it is apparently lubricating fault lines and has set off a series of earthquakes we now cannot stop. That is the earth crying out!

To conclude: This is sort of the creator of the Underground Church – we were going to print up some little posters that declared churches that would sign of on this to be Underground Churches – you can put them on your church door. The Underground Church is a movement of the spirit that regards essential Christian practice as more important than theological uniformity. It acts in all ways and at all times as a community dedicated to the ultimate wisdom that is unconditional love, beyond our differences, across our differences, in spite of our differences. To be a follower of Jesus, not just a “believer” in Christ, we must act at all times, and toward all people, as if we care more about being loving than about being right.

This, I believe, is the credo of the future of the church if there is to be one. You are called to be leaven my friends, a corrupting force for love, a subversive force for justice, and all you have to do is hide a small pinch of that love in the loaf of this broken world, trusting the power of the unfolding mystery that will one day bring us the Reign of God. On that day, there will be enough for everyone for everyone, and the angels will sing.

Thank you all.