

**Sermon: The End of Christendom**

**Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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As you have heard today we are gathering to begin our book study on Anthony Robinson's book Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations. By reading this book together, we are collectively opening ourselves to the possibility of change, movement, growth taking place within our community at this time in our corporate life. We have about 20-25 people who have signed up for small groups to discuss the book and we hope there are others of you who will read it along with us even if you can't attend a group.

One of the interesting things you will find when you read this book is a really clear description in the first chapter of a significant change that has taken place in our culture over the last 5 or 6 decades and how it has impacted our churches. You and I, Robinson writes, are living in a time that is marked by the end of Christendom, not the end of Christianity but of Christendom, by which he means that time when Christianity was the religion of the establishment. It's simply no longer the case that the U.S. is Christian nation. Those of us who come to church, or go to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in East Charlotte are a vast minority in this town. And this is true of our state as well. A Gallup Poll analysis of church attendance done between 2004-2006 placed Vermont as the second lowest at about 24% of its population (see [gallup.com](http://gallup.com) article called "Church attendance lowest in New England, Highest in South"). The country in general is now under 50%.

Robinson remembers growing up in Virginia in the 60's when a reasonable question in meeting someone for the first time was "what church do you go to?" The assumption was that living in the US meant that you were a Christian and most likely a Protestant Christian at that. And so our Protestant churches were "local" churches where the majority of people living in a particular locale attended and the majority were people born and bred within the Christian religion. The local Protestant church was a centering established institution in a culture geared around Christianity. But the truth of the matter is that things have changed. And the challenge that Robinson lays before us is that

maybe we need to change as well... at least change our conversation so that it takes into account the reality that is our church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I'd like to offer up 2 examples of the way of being church that was established in the time of Christendom might not be serving us here in post-Christendom. Most all Protestant Mainline churches hold a 45-minute long "class" for children on Sunday mornings called Sunday School. Now in the days of Christendom, 45 minutes was plenty and a nice gathering for children with some pleasant activities to do while their parents worshipped. It was an opportunity for the church to help integrate the faith that their homes and even their schools were teaching them. So we are still doing that 45-minute Sunday School, but now that 45 minutes is the only place in the lives of our children where they are learning anything about Christianity... which of course is a woefully inadequate amount of time we offer to teach our religion to our children, especially if this is the only place it is happening.

This Tuesday afternoon a group of 40 high schoolers are coming into the sanctuary for about 40 minutes to hear me tell them about Christianity. They are going first to the Islamic Center in Colchester and a synagogue in South Burlington and then after they eat at Al's French Fries – thanks a lot! – they will be sitting here to listen to me. Their teacher and I have had an exchange about this and she said to me – “you really need to understand that most of these kids know as much about Christianity as they do about Islam and Judaism. Don't assume anything. And then she gave me a list of what I could explain to them like: what does being Protestant mean, what are the rituals you practice like communion and baptism, what are the famous stories of Jesus (and here she said “in class once I referred to the good Samaritan and many in the class stared blankly at me having no idea what I was talking about”), and then she went on – an introduction to all the physical parts of the church and the sanctuary, what the holy days are and why you sing in worship and preach and read the Bible, and if you can do that in about 40 minutes that would be great!” That's what Robinson means when he says we are no longer in Christendom. You get it? And even if children attend church regularly, again, they are getting 45 minutes each Sunday of lessons about our faith, 45 minutes a week. Now if we believe that our scriptures and our religion are important at all this might be a

bit disturbing to us, but we continue to do church the way we've always done it though the circumstances around us are SO different.

The other example I lift up is this: the church as the center of the community used to be the centering place for charity giving and communal care-taking. This was one of the great benefits of being a part of a church. And we still do that as a church – we give a great deal to charity and we do a nice job of making meals and sending cards and even giving rides for those in our church who are in need. And of course this is not a problem per se. But I have to share that as I've straddled being the pastor of the church and the father of CCS students over the last 10 years, there have been times when my kids have come home with a fundraising task for some charity or we have to send canned goods into their classrooms for the food-shelf or my daughter has gone and served meals at the Salvation Army and I say to them “great!” but I'm also thinking to be honest: “now, wait a minute this is the church's domain and the school is doing it?!! What are you doing doing good for other people? That's our job!” But they are not only doing it, they are doing it very well and with their numbers, they are doing it on a much larger scale than we can do.

Same thing with people in the wider Charlotte community who have some tragedy like a death or a fire. Time and time again I have been really impressed by how this Charlotte community will rally around a family in time of need and I'll confess again that there is a little unpleasant part of me that has felt a little jealous about it because again, “isn't that our job as the church? Then what's our thing, our purpose and point?” And in both these instances I think what stirred in me was something of an identity crisis that I have felt for the church. If these traditionally churchy things are being done just as well elsewhere then what distinguishes us from anyone else, what gives us our distinct identity as a church these days in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?!! And this I think is a very important question that we need to ask ourselves which I think our book study is going to have us asking ourselves.

Before Jesus stepped into his adult ministry, before he gathered his disciples, and preached his messages and caused his trouble and was crucified and conquered death in his resurrection, before all of that, our scriptures tell us, the Spirit led him into the wilderness where he was tested. And there were three tests that the devil placed before

him. Remember the devil in Greek is diabolos, which literally means to throw across and trip up. And so the devil tries to trip Jesus up by throwing these three things across his path – he says “why don’t you change these stones into bread and feed yourself if you are the son of God,” and he led him up to the steeple of the temple and said – “why don’t you throw yourself down from here and trust that God will save you” and finally he said “I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you bow down and worship me.” These were the temptations that were thrown across Jesus’ path as he fasted in the wilderness in an effort to align himself to God. And I think it was all about timing to tell you the truth. Before the story was over Jesus would take bread and multiply it miraculously. And he would be thrown down from the temple in a certain way through his crucifixion and yet rise again. And finally there would hardly be a nation across the whole earth that would not have some relationship with him at some level or another. So it appears that these miraculous powers were not the temptations in themselves but the temptation was for Jesus to access them in his own timing for his own purposes or trust God in God’s timing for God’s purposes. It’s all in the timing.

And this I think is true in our individual lives no less than in our corporate lives as a church. It may be that we have entered into a wilderness time with the loss of our steeple and the declining of our attendance at worship as our annual report indicates. It probably is very much the case that the Protestant Mainline tradition has been in the wilderness for a little while now as it tries to adjust to life in this post-Christendom time, numbers sure seem to be indicating that. And in my conversations with people I know this is the case for certain of us on an individual level as well, a time of wilderness and of needing above all else to re-align ourselves to God. And so I’d like to end this sermon with a prayer that Annemieke shared with me from Teilhard de Chardin that could apply to you and to our incomplete church in this time of soul searching and wilderness walking, in this season of Lent. And so it is with this I’ll end:

Above all, trust the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law that progress is made by passing through some stage of instability  
and that it may take a very long time.

And so it is, I think, with you.

Your ideas mature gradually -- let them grow...  
Let them shape themselves without undue haste.  
Don't try to force them as though you could be today what time  
(That is grace and circumstances acting on your own good will)  
will make you tomorrow.  
Only God could say what this new spirit forming within you will be.  
Give our Lord the benefit of believing that His hand is leading you,  
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete..