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“The Challenge of Change”

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Revelation 21:1-6; Acts 11:1-18

It is difficult to change. This is not news to us. Anyone having habitually conducted their lives in one manner will find it challenging to choose a different path, another way to act or be or think.

For instance, you want to get into better physical condition. So you resolve to eat healthily, exercise more, engage the latest diet advice from Oprah’s gurus. A few pounds disappear and life is good.

But the sprain in your ankle knocks you out of the exercise routine. Ben and Jerry’s goes on sale at the grocery. The diet plan you were following now has a host of experts saying it isn’t safe, and the supplements you are taking are a waste of money.

Two years later, you are sitting in your doctor’s office discussing cholesterol and blood pressure meds. You wonder what happened to your good intentions, and you promise yourself you will do better because your health depends on it.

It is difficult to change.

A gambler once came to a Master to discuss a personal problem. The gambler explained, “I was caught cheating at cards yesterday, so my partners threw me out the window. What would you advise me to do?”

The Master looked straight through the man and said, “If I were you, from now on I would play cards only on the ground floor.”

The Master’s disciples were startled at his advice. After the gambler left, they demanded an explanation. “Why didn’t you tell him to stop gambling?”

“Because I knew he wouldn’t, and he needed some wisdom to help him survive,” was the Master’s simple explanation (adapted from *One Minute Wisdom* by Anthony de Mello, p. 27).

Whether it be a particular habit, a lifestyle, a mindset, or prejudice or belief system, it is difficult to change.

The Book of Acts is a story about radical change. It charts the course of that small band of disciples gathered about the resurrected Lord and how the known world was turned upside down.

What I find intriguing is how, in the pages of Acts, these followers of Jesus are often reluctant to welcome a shift of belief or behavior or practice or attitude.

Having been taught by Jesus, having experienced the trauma of crucifixion and the unbelievable joy of resurrection, having been empowered by the Spirit—given all of these things, shouldn’t the apostles, of all people, readily embrace the new reality of which Jesus spoke?

Yet much of the story of Acts is how the church had to be dragged out into the world, typically against its will and better judgment, to spread the Gospel of Christ. The challenge for the early church—as is true for the church in any age—is to proclaim and live out the Good News of Jesus. Will the church not merely talk the talk; will it also walk the walk?

I think it is fascinating *how* the Book of Acts depicts change as taking place in the church. It does not attribute the change to a highly motivated church leadership or to specially gifted and dedicated individuals. Instead it depicts change occurring

because the Spirit confronted the church with a new reality. When the world threw the church out the window, the best advice it could be offered was the same advice given to the gambler: make sure you play all your games on the first floor.

This morning's text from the 11th chapter is a case in point. Chapter 11 is a retelling of what happened in chapter 10. Sometimes repetition helps those of us who are hardheaded: maybe we will catch it on the second or third time around.

Chapters 10 and 11 tell the story of the first non-Jewish convert to the Christian faith. This event, that we assume would be a momentous one, brought the young church to a crisis. And Simon Peter unwittingly played a starring role in the crisis. When the church in Jerusalem caught wind of what happened, Peter was called on the carpet, and he had some explaining to do.

The church had never accepted a Gentile into its community, and they didn't quite know what to do about it. Kosher Jews can't just sit down to dinner with Gentiles. At the Wednesday night suppers, those Gentiles will put pork in their beans. What about all the rituals for religious purity? No committees had studied the implications, and no position papers had been written to anticipate the consequences.

“So, Peter, how did you get us into this mess?”

Explanations in such crises are never simple. One thing leads to another with unintended consequences sprouting everywhere. Peter could have saved his breath by merely saying, “It's complicated.” Instead he tells the whole story.

“I am minding my own business, attending my prayers. In the middle of this, I am interrupted by a vision. It was a crazy vision, too!

“A cloth descended from heaven, and upon this cloth were a variety of animals. These animals were of the unclean variety that no devout Jew would touch. A voice calls out to me, ‘Arise, kill, and eat,’ to which I responded, ‘Not on your life; nothing unclean like this will ever touch my lips.’ And the voice retorted, ‘What

God has made clean you must never call profane.’ Three times this vision occurred and then it disappeared.”

Peter’s story continues. A knock at the door and the summons of a stranger come to Peter. Peter is asked to speak with a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius. The Spirit prompts Peter’s understanding, so that Peter perceives this request as being related to his vision. The Spirit encourages Peter not to make distinctions that would create a barrier between him and this Gentile. So Peter goes.

Upon Peter’s arrival, Cornelius tells him he is seeking salvation and he has heard that Peter knows the way of salvation. So Peter begins to tell about Jesus, and while the words are still in Peter’s mouth, God’s Spirit comes upon these Gentiles, just as it did on the day of Pentecost when it came to the Jewish believers in Christ.

“What was I to do?” pleaded Peter with the church in Jerusalem. “This was God’s doing, not mine.”

So Peter blamed God. And what could the church do since it was all God’s fault? All they could do was accept this unsavory fact.

Peter joined a long line of folk down through history who blamed God for a bad situation rather than to take responsibility for it. That is because change is difficult. It is challenging to give up old patterns and to adapt to something new and different and unforeseen.

So when God gives you lemons, blame God as you drink the lemonade.

We often forget that one person’s Good News is someone else’s bad news. When the Israelites escaped Egypt heading to the Promised Land, that was wonderful news! But to the Egyptians who had benefited from their slave labor, this spelled the ruin of their economy. That is why Pharaoh did not capitulate quickly to Moses’ demands for his people’s freedom.

The story of Peter and Cornelius is patterned on another story from the Old Testament. It is not immediately obvious.

Remember the story of Jonah? Jonah was asked by God to warn Nineveh of God's impending judgment because of their evil ways.

Yet Jonah had no interest in warning the people of Nineveh. The Ninevites were foreigners and enemies of Jonah's homeland. As far as he was concerned, it would be good riddance for Nineveh to be destroyed by God. He wanted nothing to do with warning them. Jonah only changed his mind about God's errand after spending 3 days in the belly of a great fish.

And so Jonah departed for his errand from the town of Joppa.

And where was Peter when he was summoned to visit Cornelius? It happened to be the town of Joppa. Both Jonah and Peter were reluctant messengers. Both were successful in their mission with people welcoming their words and acting favorably upon their message. And for both, the positive reception of the message created difficulties for them.

Perhaps the writer of Acts was remembering Peter's Aramaic name when he made this connection: Simon bar Jonah, Simon son of Jonah.

It is challenging to change.

A religious group whose leader openly accepted sinners and outcasts: why should members be surprised when sinners and outcasts want to join?

A community whose central figure is a servant: why should members be surprised when its privileges are challenged?

A church gathers itself around a symbol of suffering and death: the cross. Why should we be surprised when called upon to sacrifice for the sake of others?

Yet we are surprised. Sometimes we even get indignant. We can get our nose out of joint and go off to sulk. Some folks will even join another church or become inactive.

It is challenging to change.

I want you to picture this. A visitor come to church and finds a seat about midway down the aisle, to the right, sitting not quite in the middle of the pew. We are always glad to have visitors, and we intend to be a welcoming church. We even have a staff person dedicated to killing visitors with kindness if only the visitor will leave a name and address and phone number to contact them!

The visitor has taken a seat. And an older women shuffles up to the pew. The pew is empty except for that lone visitor. The woman moves down the pew to where the visitor is sitting. The visitor looks up, expecting a kind word of greeting. The woman says, “You are sitting in my pew!”

Any of us who want visitors to feel welcome pull out our hair when we hear such stories! One of our goals is to extend and expand our reach to others beyond our own membership. It is easy to understand why a visitor in such a circumstance might choose not to return for a second visit.

It is so easy for us to judge that woman. But let’s suspend judgment while we consider things from her perspective.

A husband and wife have shared a pew for 46 years since they were married in the chancel of the sanctuary. They watched their 3 children baptized at the font. For 12 years they endured 3 little ones squirming in their seats and coloring a thousand sheets of paper. They helped the kids learn hymns and the Lord’s Prayer. They watched proudly as each of them professed their faith with the confirmation classes. From that pew, desperate prayers were offered in times of great personal stress. The challenges of service and mission stretched their faith and their understanding. They were stunned that the years had gone so quickly when their daughter walked down the aisle to be married. They shared God’s grace at Holy Communion, and they found the fellowship of dear friends in this place. Two years ago, the husband died and, of course, the service was here in the sanctuary.

Forty-eight years of faith and life and love are on that pew with that woman. When she comes to sit in “her pew,” that place is, for her, holy ground.

What appears as something inconsequential to an outside observer is deeply personal to the one who is living it from the inside.

It is no wonder that religions fight over holy ground.

It is challenging to change. That is why it seems to take an act of God to break our expectations and assumptions.

Where are the lines of division within our ranks today? Blue or red? Liberal or conservative? Citizen or immigrant? Labor or management? Black or Latino or White? Pro-choice or pro-life?

In this story from the Book of Acts, it is instructive that only through a compelling vision that the church, and Peter as its representative, escapes its inertia and embraces a new way of being and acting and accepting. It is the vision of a new heaven and new earth that breaks the hold that present arrangements have on us.

Occasionally one person has a vision and rises to prominence, saying, “I have a dream,” and a nation is spurred on to new levels of conscience and justice and equity. Yet it never comes easily and without conflict.

At times we as the church need a vision that removes the boundaries we place to keep us in or to keep others out. Sometimes the Spirit must whisper in our ears to remind us to make no distinctions. Sometimes a messenger prepares our way to bring words of hope and salvation to those different from us. And in the end, the church is always surprised to discover that we are not so different from “them” and they are not so different from us.

One of the significant opportunities you have as a congregation during this interim time is to see new possibilities, a new vision of what God is calling First Presbyterian Church to be and do as the people of God in this place.

I am confident—not that you and I aren't up to the task—that the Spirit will accomplish what must be done, even if that means the Spirit drags us kicking and screaming into the future! Our confidence remains in the One who sent the Spirit into the life of the early church and unleashes that Spirit to lead the church today!



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