

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

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Most of us have children who are not children anymore. They have grown up. They have changed. It's not just a matter of height. That's over now. It's a matter of mind and spirit. They have matured. They have become their own person, independent, thinking for themselves, discovering who they are and deciding who they want to become. I'm sure we are all proud of them, but, you know, I not sure that I like it. I miss those days when our children were young, but change and their growth were inevitable, and for the better.

Change. "All is flux, nothing stays still. Nothing endures but change," wrote Heraclitus over 25 centuries ago.ⁱ Yet his time seemed to stand still compared to ours, and the changes we experience in our society, our church, and our lives. "There is nothing in this world constant, but inconstancy," wrote Jonathan Swift.ⁱⁱ That is so true for our time it has almost become a cliché.

Change. How do we deal with it?

Those who study change note that generally speaking change, whether it is good or bad, feels bad. Even good change often feels bad. People prefer equilibrium. We need stability. Inertia is built into our constitutions. Change upsets us and feels bad. And so we don't like it.

Change feels risky taking us into the unknown. Change can make us fearful and anxious. It also makes us feel confused as if we are lost. The terrain is no longer familiar and we are uncertain as to where we are and where we are going.

Yet that confusion is good. I remember an educator telling a class I was in that feeling confused means that you are learning something. If you feel comfortable then what you are learning is simply what you already know. If you feel uncomfortable then

you are moving into new understandings which for the time being make you feel uneasy but which in time will become as familiar as the old territory from which we have ventured.

Still, it feels bad, and we don't like it. Moreover, too much change can even harm and hurt us.

Physicians and psychologists have long known that change can have a profound negative effect on our bodies and minds, on our physical, mental and spiritual health. The Holmes-Rahe scale was developed in an attempt to quantify that effect. It is a table listing the possible changes in one's life and giving each change a rating. Adding up the ratings gives some indication of the probability that one will suffer some negative impact on one's health.

The list contains, of course, the things we would expect, divorce, the death of a loved one, losing one's job. Yet it also includes things you might not expect such as marriage, the birth of a child, getting a new job. It even includes going on vacation and celebrating Christmas.

Too much change, no matter what the nature, is not good. It leads to illness and burn out. But would we really want to experience no change at all? Would we want to do away with marriage and having children and taking vacations and celebrating? Of course not.

But, you see, the opposite is also true. Too little change, too little stress, is also bad for your health. It leads to what is called rust out, and stress experts tell us that rust out is even harder to deal with than burn out.

We don't like change. It feels bad. We resist it. But we need it. We need it to grow. We need it to fulfil our potential. We need it for our health – physical, mental and spiritual. We need it for our enjoyment and enrichment. And what's more despite our resistance, we crave it. We want change.

Peter Senge comments that at workshops he will ask whether the participants believe that people and organizations only change fundamentally when there is a crisis. Reliably, 75 to

90 percent say yes. Change happens because of crisis. Then he asks the people to consider a life where everything is exactly the way they would like – there are absolutely no problems of any sort in work, professionally, personally, in their relationships or their communities. Then he asks, “What is the first thing you would seek if you had a life of absolutely no problems?” The answer, overwhelmingly, is “change – to create something new.”ⁱⁱⁱ We fear change but we seek change. We want good things to happen, something new, something different. We want to go on vacation, to celebrate important events, to find a life partner, to raise children and have them grow up, to become more mature ourselves, to develop to our potential, to grow as people, to thrive as a church. We fear change but we need it and we seek it.

For Christians, however, there is even a more compelling reason to want change. The Kingdom of God, God’s Sovereign reign is not yet here. We as individuals are not what we can be and what God wants us to be. We as a church are not what we can be and what God wants us to be. We as a society are not what we can be and what God wants us to be. Individually and corporately, we do not yet fully incarnate the love of God that was in Christ and that he commanded we express. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”^{iv}

That commandment has not yet been totally fulfilled, fully satisfied, so change is necessary. We need to welcome change, the changes wrought by God. Moreover, we need to be change agents.

Do you remember what Paul and Silas and the other disciples of Jesus were called in Thessalonica when they preached and brought many, both Jew and Gentile, to Christ? They called them “those who have turned the world upside down.”^v We follow a Master who turned the world upside down. He showed us through word and deed the way of love, compassion, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, inclusion, encouragement, qualities that

were not prevalent, and are not yet. He even turned death upside down and made it the door to life. And so, his followers did the same and found that they *could* do the same because the same love incarnated in Jesus could and did live in them through his Spirit in power and in wisdom.

Consider the story we heard today in the book of Acts.^{vi} Jesus was understood by his followers as a rabbi describing a new way within Judaism. To become a Christian a Gentile had to become a Jew first. Peter had the audacity to change that. He took Cornelius and his friends, Gentiles, people deemed unclean and common, and he preached to them. And when the Holy Spirit came upon them, he baptized them even though they had not yet become Jews and would not. Outsiders were now in.

When he returned to Jerusalem, Peter was called on the carpet by his friends, "What do you think you're doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?"

So Peter told them the whole story and he ended by saying, "Who was I that I could withstand God?"^{vii} At that, they were silenced. They realized that these changes, as unpleasant as they appeared, were wrought by God, and so they celebrated glorifying God and exclaiming, "It has really happened! God has broken through to other nations, opened them up to the way of life."

Everything was changed. It was scary, risky, but you do not withstand God. Rather you stand with God. You bring about the changes God desires. This particular change opened the way to the expansion of the church across the face of the earth. Because of what Peter did responding to the leading of God you and I of Gentile origin are here today part of Christ's church. The challenge for us today is not to withstand God but to stand with God as change agents bringing about God's Reign of love and peace.

Isn't that what the Church has always been about and continues to be about? Think about our holy words, our special words describing the Christian life – repentance, confession,

conversion, salvation, regeneration, sanctification, being born again, transformation, re-creation. These are all words about change. "Whoever is in Christ," Paul wrote, "is a new creation; the old has passed away, the new has come."^{viii} Jesus came to change individuals, to change the world, to turn it upside down, to bring love, peace, justice, mercy, compassion. And Jesus comes now to continue to change individuals and to change the world and to change the church.

Jesus came also to bring peace, but the peace he brings is not as the world brings.^{ix} It is beyond understanding.^x It is not restfulness or an unchanging life, but calm in the midst of change. It is a spiritual stability that carries us through change. It is the inner gyroscope that makes steadiness possible during stormy days of change. More than this, though, it is a firm foundation, a place to stand, from which we can produce change, a place from which we can struggle to make a better world. What gives us confidence and stability is not an unchanging church but an unchanging God in Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever.^{xi}

As part of the church, we must become confident change agents changing ourselves, changing our church, changing our world, and working to bring about the Sovereign Reign of God.

The difficulty is in knowing the way to go. How can we know the way to change? How can we discern the changes that God wants wrought in the world, in our church, in our own personal lives, today? "I am the Way," Jesus said. "I will send the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, who will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."^{xii} The Spirit will guide you, direct you, and accompany you, and you need not fear for all is well, and all will be well. The only way to discern the changes God desires is following Jesus' example and teaching, being sensitive to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit and then risking by acting on that knowledge and making changes.

In the old *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show, Amos once asked the Kingfish why he had such good judgement. "Well," said the Kingfish, "good judgement comes from experience."

“Then where does experience come from?” Amos asked.

“From bad judgement,” was the answer.^{xiii}

Good judgement and discernment come from experience. Growth comes from being willing to risk change, even change that may not turn out just as we had planned.

Change. We fear it. We resist it. But we need it, and we even crave it. So, trusting in the unchangeable God, accept the challenge of change, and just do it. The possibilities are amazing indeed.

Amen.

ⁱ Heraclitus, *Diogenes Laertius*, Bk IX, Sec. 8, and *Plato*, *Cratylus*, 402A.

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Swift, *A Critical Essay upon the Faculties of the Mind*, 1707.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (Doubleday, 1990), pp. 154-155.

^{iv} John 13: 34, 35, from the gospel reading for today.

^v Acts 17: 6.

^{vi} Acts 11: 1-18. Some of the quotations are from the paraphrase by Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Navpress, 1993).

^{vii} Acts 11: 17.

^{viii} 2 Corinthians 5: 17.

^{ix} John 14: 27.

^x Philippians 4: 7.

^{xi} Hebrews 13: 8.

^{xii} John 14: 6, 26.

^{xiii} Quoted in David Mahoney, “Street Sharp! Street Smart!” *Reader’s Digest* (January 1989) pp. 5-6.