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“CHANGE”
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How easily do you deal with change? Some people can't even change their minds? Personally it isn't hard to get me to change my mind. For example, every time I preach it is expected that I have the scripture that I am going to preach about and a general description of the direction my sermon will go. More often than not, this is done before I have even begun sermon preparation much less have written the sermon. This can make things tricky for me because sometimes I paint myself into a corner before I even begin. So if you read the newsletter, you saw something about Ecclesiastes in there, but I changed my mind.

I still want to talk about change, but instead of drawing my inspiration from Ecclesiastes, I looked at the story of Peter.

The apostle Peter was always one person who seemed to know where he was going in life. He would boldly make his mind up. But there was an occasion when he had to reconsider his position and change his mind in the early days of the church.

Peter, the ex-fisherman now bold apostle, was sitting on the sundeck of the house of Simon Tanner, having a quiet time of prayer while he waited for lunch. He was starving. While he was sitting in the sun enjoying its warmth and his conversation with God in prayer, something weird happened though. He had a vision. This experience led him to begin a painful, personal change. He was compelled to confront his own snobbish attitudes, and his own deep prejudices.

Peter didn't want to change. Surely he thought he had already changed enough since he first met Jesus character. He had already filled his quota of upheavals for one lifetime. Nevertheless, the vision that God gave him led him to change yet one more time.

Change can be a very painful thing. Even simple changes can be unpleasant. For example, I stand up here every week so I know where you guys like to sit, but what if I asked you to move from your familiar position where you sit in this church – those in the front move to the back and those in the back move to the front – would you willingly do this? And if you did move would you feel comfortable sitting in a different place. To be honest, we don't like being disturbed. We like to stay settled in our comfort zone.

Of course most changes are tougher than that small example. Whenever we are called to make a major shift out of a comfortable way of thinking and doing things, then the distress can be extensive. We would rather dodge these discomfoting times. But change will happen. We know that from experience. As we go from one stage of life to another, things change. As children grow up and become independent, things change. Even in the church, things change.

Look at this place. So much has changed so quickly. We had a merger with Newburgh Pres that brought new faces to a place that was completely different to them. Our pastor who served this church longer than I have been alive retired. But that isn't even close to the only change! We have walls where we used to not. We have new crosses where there were none. We have lights where there weren't any. Doors with corny posters have been replaced with HVAC systems that will soon be covered up. We are doing things that we have never done before. It seems like every time I walk into this building something is changing.

It's like we are a tv show that has been on the air longer than its creators expected. The cast has changed, the set has changed, but the plot has not. And make no mistake, I am uncomfortable but I am not complaining.

Back to Peter up on the sundeck, waiting for his lunch. Please remember that up until now, Christianity had been mainly a movement among the Jews. Gentiles – non Jews – were still on the outside. There was this mutual segregation between the cultures. As Peter sat in the sun, he had a vision which confronted his very Jewishness.

Jews, like Peter, were kosher, that means they were not allowed to eat certain foods. Foods like pork, rabbits, eels, snakes, certain birds, insects, and lizards. I'm not sure why you would eat some of those things regardless about what your divinely inspired dietary restrictions are but now in his vision, Peter saw a tarpaulin lowered down from God in heaven. In it were all kinds of creepy crawlies and disgusting foods. Peter was repulsed. But the voice of the Lord asked him to get up, kill something and eat it for lunch. Remember Peter was waiting for lunch and was particularly hungry.

“Not so, Lord,” Peter declared. “I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” (10:14)

The Lord answered: “What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean.” (10:15).

This happened three times. Same words. Same result. Peter woke up; shaken by the vision he had received. What did it mean? It didn't take long to find out.

Messengers arrived at the house. Peter was asked to go to the town of Caesarea, to share the Gospel with Cornelius, a Roman army officer. Fighting all his old prejudices and still hearing the word of the Lord in his head, "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean." Peter did what was unthinkable, he entered the Gentile's house, saying, "God has shown me that I shouldn't call any man unholy or unclean". (acts 10:28)

Think of Peter standing on the doormat at the front door of Cornelius' house. Most likely he broke out in a cold sweat when for the first time in his life he entered the house of a Gentile. Painful as it was, he did it. As he preached the Holy Spirit moved in the hearts of the people as they marveled at what God had done through his Son, Jesus, and they were baptized.

Peter had undergone a radical change in his attitude and life. He knew that his fellow Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem wouldn't agree with what he had done, but Peter knew that God was determined to move them over the old hump of prejudice. The Gospel belonged to all people, irrespective of race, language, or culture.

For Peter, change brought with it the stress of going against what was common practice. He was challenged to see things differently and to act differently and through this helped to alter the whole course of the young Christian Church. The conversion and baptism of Cornelius gives witness to the change that had taken place in Peter's heart.

Following in the footsteps of Peter, God is always calling us to step forward and participate in changing what is not right and God-pleasing in our world. But in order to do this, he is constantly calling us to change. There are no exceptions to this. I say this because Jesus died on the cross to change our relationship with God. He died to give us newness and new life – to turn away from the ways of the world and our own sinful natures – and change direction and follow God's ways as his children.

Jesus Christ compelled us to a life of faith and faith is not complacent, faith is not proud, faith does not forget. Faith to our Lord, the God of the universe, by its very nature is never finished. Faith is always changing, faith looks different in different

circumstances and leading by example Jesus taught us that we always need to be on our toes.

Yet we resist change. We don't like it. We are quite comfortable, thank you very much. You might say that we get caught in a rut. Someone has said, "*A spiritual rut is a coffin with the ends knocked out*". It takes an extra effort to get out of a rut. A rut is not really living, not allowing the Holy Spirit challenge you to get off the road and go places where you haven't been before.

It is inconceivable to think that God is not calling His church at this moment in history to undergo changes of some sort.

Some of God's changes may need to be taken slowly, step by small step. Then the pain will be mild but ongoing. But on other occasions, we need to change swiftly and move with the speed and commitment shown by the Apostle Peter. Then our distress may be acute. The change will upset us, make us feel uncomfortable, even want to rebel against the change.

It may mean pushing aside caution, subduing our personal biases, and bravely undertaking something new for Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

The New Testament talks a lot about "the new life", being "changed or transformed" through what Christ has done for us in His death and resurrection.

Too often we think of this in an individual and personal way, and that is intended, but the New Testament is talking to the church – the people of God – us. Christ has brought newness into the church and this newness leads to change. I would even go so far as to say that if the church is not constantly being challenged to change, be made new, be reformed and transformed, then it is in a rut and there's nothing exciting about being in a rut.

What are some of the ruts you are stuck in – remember a rut is something that always keeps us going down the same track;

it's very hard to get out of a deep rut;

it keeps us from going anywhere else to see and try different ways of doing things;

it keeps us going down the same track even when it's not healthy or good to keep on doing so.

We can even be in a rut when it comes to our involvement in God's work here at Eastminster. The rut might be when we are challenged in some way we pass it off by saying to ourselves,

"Someone else can do that".

"I don't like doing that kind of thing".

"We've never done *that* before".

Peter could have easily said to God when he received the message to go to the home of Cornelius, "God, don't ask me. I can't do that. It goes against everything I'm used to. I've never done that before, let someone else go."

Like Peter we too are challenged to express the newness that God has created in us. Paul said that we have been saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus "so we also might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

That newness means getting out of the rut of old habits,

- the rut of impatience, prejudice and intolerance,
- the rut that leads us to think that the church is there to meet our needs and not giving a second thought to anyone else and their needs;
- the rut that doesn't allow us to get out of our comfort zone and talk to strangers at church but always leads us down the same track to the few people we feel comfortable with;
- the rut that says it's some else's job
- the rut that forces us into stagnation, unwilling and unable to change.

Consider again the story of Peter, and the vision that shook him up while he was reclining on the sun-deck waiting for his lunch. Peter had to embrace painful change within himself. He didn't always get it right.

He would get the tremors, at times. He would sometimes back pedal. In fact, on one occasion Paul had to publicly confront Peter about his backsliding into old Jewish prejudices. Not a painless occasion. Yet to his credit Peter heard the rebuke,

took it to heart, and recovered the bold spirit that had inspired him to enter the house of a Gentile Roman and preach the Gospel with stunning results.

Jesus died to bring change and renewal into our lives and into the life of his church. So, as we grow restless, as we grow more uncomfortable, let's make it our prayer, "Lord, change our hearts to go where you are leading us."

Amen