

Reconciliation and Change

B-11, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; Ephesians 2:11-22

Robert Woody, 7/22/18

Sermon-in-a-Sentence: In order to be the Reconciling Body of Christ, we have to be willing to accept major changes as we reach out to and connect with our diverse brothers and sisters.

Children's Sermon:

Are you good friends with **everyone** that goes to your school or lives in your neighborhood? Probably not. Why? Because we can be very different from our neighbors or classmates. We can like different things. Have different things we like to do. These differences can **separate** us; keep us from connecting and being real friends.

Are you all alike? Do you all like exactly the same things? Nope.

You can't make new friends if you expect all your friends to only like what you like, and only do what you like to do.

Jesus says we are supposed to love our neighbors. Does he mean we are only to love the ones who are like us, have similar ideas, skills, do things we like to do? Or does he mean **all** our neighbors; even those who are different, maybe very different from us? I think Jesus wants us to love all our neighbors, even those who are very different from us.

How do we reach out and love someone who is very different from us? We have to be willing to **change**, so we can connect with someone who is different from us.

Let's say you live near a park and you have a new neighbor who is very different from you. You like to ride your bike in the park. But your neighbor doesn't have a bike, and likes to take walks in the park and look for birds and butterflies and other creatures. If you were willing to change and instead of riding your bike, take a walk with your new neighbor, and maybe talk about birds and butterflies; if you were willing to do something they like to do, you would probably become friends. And he or she might be willing to change also, and maybe get a bicycle so they could ride with you in the park, and do what you like to do.

If we aren't willing to **change**, we can never become friends with someone who is very different from us.

That's part of the story of the **Church**. We've had to make many changes to be able to include and become friends with other people who are different from us. That's what Paul is talking about in our reading from his letter to the Ephesians. The early Church was mostly Jewish people who wanted to hang on to a lot of their Jewish habits and traditions. But Paul and other leaders challenged and convinced the Jewish Christians to change, to let go of many of their Jewish ideas and traditions. If the early Jewish Church had refused to change, the Church would never have spread to countries that were different.

It wasn't easy, but the Jewish Church did compromise, and agree to make changes, so we could all be brothers and sisters in Christ, even if we came from different countries and different traditions.

Is it easy to let go of what we've always liked and make changes so we can make new friends? Nope. But are you willing to stretch and try to make changes so you can become friends with people who are different?

If you do, you are following the Way of Jesus, the way of loving all our neighbors, even those who are very different!

Adult Sermon:

The Church has gone through many changes in our 2,000 year history. But we are perfect now and we don't need to make any more changes. We should just keep doing everything exactly the same; same liturgy and music, same teams, staff, budget, *etc.* Right? Probably not.

One of the things we brag about Rec is all the significant changes we have intentionally gone through, and all the ways we have stretched our diocese and our bishops to make changes.

So are we done? Is everything perfect at Rec now? And in our diocese? Are we done reconciling? We have done a lot of great things, but I don't think we are finished. The world keeps changing, younger generations are changing, and we have to keep changing.

In our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul celebrates one of the first major changes of the Church. The first Christians, who were mostly Jews, wanted to hold on to many of their Jewish traditions, including things like circumcision of all males. Initially, when they sent people like Paul out beyond Israel, beyond the Jewish world, to share the story of Jesus and expand the Church among non-Jews, or Gentiles, the Jewish Christians wanted the Gentiles to adopt all their traditions, including circumcision. That didn't work.

Jewish Christian missionaries like Paul, began to realize the Church had to change if it was going to grow beyond Israel. And they did. Here's Paul celebrating the changing Church, in his letter to the Gentile Ephesians:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups (Jews and Gentiles) into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, (all the Jewish rules) that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, So then you are no longer

strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God”

Since Paul’s time, has the Church continued to change in order to bring together different groups of people who had been separated? **Yes.** The Church has had times when we’ve tried to cling to our traditions, but we have also, through the centuries been willing to take on major changes so we can welcome and embrace our neighbors who are often times very different.

At Rec, in the last 50 years we have changed many times, we have been willing to change so we can reconcile with veterans, divorcees, 12 Steppers, gay and lesbian and transgender people, disabled adults.

Are we done? Have we reached perfection? Are there still people being shunned and abused that we should reach out to, even if we have to, again, change our opinions, our perspectives, our traditions?

I read an interesting article recently about the human species. An anthropologist says the human species has been successful because of our ability to create and respond to change. But the Neanderthal species wasn’t into creativity and change, and they were left behind and eventually disappeared as the world continued to change. Like the human species, will the church survive if we resist change?

Take a moment to reflect on your individual life journey. Where has God led you? How many of your childhood and teenage and early adult beliefs and perceptions have been radically changed?

When I was a young adult in my late 20’s, I believed drinking wine was a sin, even at communion, gays and lesbians were demon possessed, all people of all other religious traditions were going to hell. And then I was kicked out of the Baptist Church for going through a divorce, a change they would not accept.

Thank God, the Church, for me, has changed radically, and it has radically changed me.

So are we perfect now? Do we need to hold on to all our current beliefs and practices? Is our ’79 Prayer Book perfect? Are our services and liturgies perfect? Or is the world continuing to change? Are there still people very different from us out in the world, or maybe next door, that we need to open up to, listen to, reconcile with?

The Church is aging. We’ve talked about this many times before. Most congregations, especially Protestant congregations, are aging and shrinking. I believe this is happening, at least in part, because we are reluctant and resistant to **change**. We are not listening to our immigrant neighbors; we are not listening to younger generations, who see the world through a very different lens.

If we are going to survive and thrive as the Church, we have to be willing to change so we can welcome our diverse neighbors and younger generations.

The Jewish Christians like Paul brought an incredible gift to the Gentiles around the Mediterranean, including the Ephesians. But only because they were willing to change.

Ironically, we at Rec, are in the middle of celebrating our 50th Anniversary. And we are discerning and describing and celebrating our DNA, so we can hold onto it. So we don't let it drift away. So we don't change our DNA. Is that a problem?

Our DNA is different from specific actions or traditions or decisions we have made. Our DNA is more about "character." Our DNA has been to be welcoming, and inclusive, and creative, and reconciling, and open to radical changes.

The challenge has been, and continues to be, our willingness to apply our DNA to new and changing circumstances. Are we willing to welcome and include people that we have never welcomed and included before?

I pray that we, like Paul, will someday, maybe 20 years from now, we will be able to celebrate the reconciliation between generations and between diverse communities that has allowed Reconciliation to continue to grow and thrive in a changing world.

Amen