

Change?

Luke 5:33-39

Introduction – Religious Light Bulbs

Recently, I've been working on a three-season room on the back of my house. Well, not just recently. More like for the last two years. I'm getting near the end and I've told Diane that I'm not doing any framing, insulation or drywall next year. In fact, the guy who came and textured the walls asked me what I did for a living. When I told him I was a pastor at First Baptist he told me to stick with my day job. Evidently, I'm not very good at taping and mudding. Fair enough.

As the room has neared completion, I've put some light bulbs in place. Trying to be a good citizen and steward of the environment, I invested in some of those CFL bulbs – you know, the “curly fry” light bulbs – the ones that cost five dollars a piece and you need a hazmat suit to clean up if you break one. I have one light on a dimmer and an electrician friend told me that the curly fries wouldn't work well on a dimmer. I went to Menards and found that you can get a dimmable halogen bulb for \$17. So much for saving money. OK. I'll take another path with the dimming light.

I did put a curly fry into an exterior fixture. It was nice. Really lit up the back yard. That is, until the first frost and then it didn't work anymore. Five bucks down the drain. I'm back to the old incandescent bulbs now. For all my attempts to be a good citizen and ecologically responsible, I guess I think the old bulbs are better. I don't like change after all. Which, of course, leads me to these questions:

Q: How many Charismatics does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Only one. Their hands are already in the air.

Q: How many Pentecostals does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Ten. One to change it and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

Q: How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Eight. One to call the electrician and seven to say how much they liked the old one better.

Q: How many Nazarenes does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Six. One woman to replace the bulb while five men review the church lighting policy.

Q: How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb?

A. None. Candles only.

Q: How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb?

A: *Change?*

Now I know those jokes are old and maybe you've heard them before. It's good to laugh at ourselves. The fact is, change is a necessary but difficult experience of life. No person rattled more people and brought about more deep change than Jesus Christ. In three short parables, he illustrated the necessity of change.

Text – Luke 5:33-39

And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink.” And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.” He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’”

Paradigm Upheaval in Jesus' Day

Contrary to a popular commercial, Jesus was the world's most interesting man. He came to bring life and hope. When he was born, the angels declared, "peace on earth, good will toward men." But later, Jesus would declare, "I have not come to bring peace, but sword..." (Matt. 10:34). Jesus came to upset the system. He came to bring change.

The Pharisees and scribes knew that Jesus was a religious leader because of his miracles and his teachings. Early in his ministry, it seems that they even respected him. But they didn't understand him. They thought that he was going to renew the people within in the Old Testament religious system that they knew. The Pharisees and scribes thought that Jesus was just John the Baptist, Version 2.0. They had no idea that, in Jesus, the whole sacrificial system would be fulfilled and replaced. And so they asked him why he wasn't following the same patterns of ministry that John used.

They weren't getting it. Jesus was bringing something entirely new. He was the promised Messiah who would fulfill and replace the sacrificial system. And so Jesus gave them a word picture and two parables. It was the first time that he referred to himself as the Bridegroom. Later on, he would develop that idea further in other parables and the Apostles would recognize the Church as the Bride of Christ. Everybody knew about wedding parties. It wasn't a time to be sad or, certainly, to fast. The food and drink was the best to be had. It was time to party! Jesus, though the word picture of a wedding, told them that it was the opportune time to celebrate while he was there. Things were changing. He was not John the Baptist 2.0. Soon enough, he would be gone and his followers would then fast and pray. But not now. Not while he was with them.

He then dug down deeper with two parables about change.

They're easy enough to understand. You don't cut a piece of fabric off of a new garment in order to patch an old one. If you do that, you ruin the new one and when you wash the old one, the new fabric will shrink and tear the old garment. The parable about wineskins explains even more. In the ancient world, new wine would be put into skins to continue the fermenting

process. Through the natural chemical process, it would expand. If you put new wine into an old and dry wineskin, it would eventually burst, destroying the skin and losing all the wine. New wine required a new wineskin made from animal skin that still had elasticity and the ability to expand as the wine fermented.

What Jesus was conveying through the two parables was that the Old Covenant enacted through the sacrificial system prescribed in the Old Testament was now becoming obsolete. We can hardly imagine today the earth-shaking shock that the full realization of what Jesus was saying and doing would have brought to the religious leaders of his day. It would be like someone coming to us as Americans and saying that our system of democracy was obsolete; a new system would be instituted to govern our nation. Uh, sorry. That would not go over very well. That's why Jesus spoke in parables. Only those who were willing to hear and granted God's grace to understand got it. Had the religious leaders understood what he was saying, they would have killed him on the spot. Eventually, they did.

After the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost the church finally began to understand what Jesus actually did and what he was saying. The early sermons in the Book of Acts illustrate their understanding that Jesus had fulfilled the entire religious sacrificial system of the Old Testament. But it took nearly a generation for them grasp that everything had changed – that Jesus had indeed replaced the Old Covenant. It wasn't until the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 that they understood the fullness of Jesus' work.

It took time and circumstances for the change to really take root in the people of God. It took nearly forty years for Jewish Christians to realize that they did not need the Temple to worship God – that indeed, their bodies were the temple of the Living God as the Holy Spirit lived inside of them. It took a long time and there were many difficult challenges along the way to finally fully embrace the change that Jesus brought.

You see, change is hard. Most folks don't want to change. Three gospels record these parables; only Luke includes Jesus' last insightful comment: "And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good [or in some translations, "better"]'. (vs. 39)

Is All Change Good or Necessary?

Our modern capitalist society is addicted to change. Change is critical for our economy. Every few years we are supposed to buy a new car. Clothes go out of style and we're supposed to buy a new wardrobe even before the old wears out in order to be "with it." Diane watches the HGTV channel. She's informed me that knotty pine is out of style, so we need to whitewash all our walls downstairs. I quote Scripture and say, "The old is better!" What's in style in my house is what I like. It's an on-going battle. I can be resistant to change just like the worst of any curmudgeon.

But what about change in the church? Jesus was, after all, talking about a massive spiritual change in his parables. We live in a culture that is always changing. One of the unchangeables of our culture is that change is constant. How should the church respond to an ever-changing culture? This is always been a question that the church has had to wrestle with. When more and more Gentiles were being brought into the church the leadership had to decide whether or not they needed to be circumcised and observe certain Jewish prohibitions on diet. When human reason began to be released during the Renaissance, the Roman Catholic Church had to decide whether or not it would allow its absolute authority to be questioned. Sadly, they would not and the Reformation was launched. When John Wycliffe translated the Scriptures into the people's language he was burned at the stake. When John Wesley preached to the masses in the open air he was severely condemned by his own Anglican Church. When Charles Finney instituted what he called "new measures" in an effort to evangelize Americans he, too, was condemned by the religious elite in his own denomination. When Ira Sankey introduced a little pump organ to his church, many of the people stomped out of the service in protest.

In my own lifetime, when new, biblically faithful translations of the Scriptures emerged in the 60's and 70's, they were met by many with stiff opposition. When the long-haired barefoot drugged out hippies of a previous generation got saved in the Jesus People Movement many were turned away from churches until they cut their hair and put on a coat and tie. When they wanted to bring their music with guitars and drums into worship they were told that the music was of the devil and had no place in the church even though the fruit of God's work was very evident in their lives.

And what about the questions before churches today? Screens verses hymnals. Video messages verses live? Should we embrace same-sex marriage or resist it?

Obviously, not all questions of change are of equal importance. Not all change is good. Not all change is necessary. What are the criteria for embracing change? The church gets in trouble when it changes just to stay up with the times. The church forsakes its calling when it changes for change sake without careful reflection.

Anytime a change is made, there is a loss. Sometimes those losses are insignificant. Sometimes they are only sentimental. We like something simply because we are comfortable with it and are attached to it. That may be a reason to keep it, but if it gets in the way of fulfilling the mission of the church, then it needs to be changed. There are all kinds of questions that we wrestle with. Should we require the pastor and all the deacons to wear a coat and tie on Sunday morning? Well, that was an expectation two generations ago. For many, that kind of formality communicates a resistance to change. I don't want to communicate that so I've made a change. I've dropped the tie (but kept the coat to hide my gut) and made it optional for myself and anyone else who is visible in the service. If you want to wear a coat and tie, that's fine. But we don't require it. We can talk about pulpits, musical styles, bulletin formats, building refresh concepts...the areas of consideration and conversation are almost endless. If something will help us to better fulfill our mission – that of helping people find and follow Jesus – then we will seriously consider adopting it.

On the other hand, certain changes would result in unacceptable losses. There are changes that we will resist, such as core doctrinal challenges (though we need to define what is “core”) and cultural challenges to the faith – such as same sex marriage. We will resist them because to embrace them would compromise our ability to fulfill our mission. If the transformational message of the gospel is changed, we will fail in our calling help people truly follow Jesus.

Change is always happening. Not all change is good. Not all change should be pursued.

Change or Die

We should always be ready to change if God is initiating the change and if the change would help us better fulfill our mission. The gospel is about change. It is about changing lives. If you think the Christian life is simply saying a prayer so that you'll go to heaven when you die but never have to change your life – well, you heard the wrong gospel. The Christian life is a journey of change – of being changed, as Paul put it, “from glory to glory” into the image of Christ (II Cor. 3:18). For the church, that means we must change together as well if change is needed to stay faithful to our mission. Sometimes that means new structures and methodologies such as programs, music, and ministry strategies.

The choice is simple, friends. Change or die. That sounds ominous and threatening. The fact is, over 80% of churches in America today are declining or dying. That means they are either losing membership or they are not growing at the same rate as their community. I want to be in the 20% that are alive and growing and I'm sure you do, too. We need to be flexible and elastic. We need new wineskins. We have to change.

But change is hard. Really hard. Historically, the church has always had a hard time with it. I have a hard time with it. That's why I'm down here on the floor this week than on the platform. I didn't want to communicate “from on high” that you need to “get with the program.” No. We're in this together. And I want to tell you, as I know many of you struggle with changes we've made, I, too, have had deep struggles in our journey together.

But I want to encourage you as well. Most of you know that First Baptist has needed a lot of change. And we've negotiated a lot of change in the last few years. You've had to adjust to a completely different kind of lead pastor. Some of you may still not be so sure. I get that. But, by and large, we've got on pretty well. We've changed the pulpit. We've radically changed the music. We changed the bulletin. We changed the Sunday morning time. Sunday nights have changed. We could go on. You probably would have a longer list than me. But the truth is, church, you've done it with pretty much a lot of grace.

I know there are some who may feel uncomfortable with changes we've made. We've done so much it's almost like being dizzy. But the truth is, church, there's still a lot more change that will probably need to happen. But this I will tell you. We will undertake no changes just for the sake of change. Every change we make will be tightly bound to our mission of helping people find and follow Jesus. If the change increases our effectiveness in our mission, we will change, even if and when the loss resulting from the change is painful. But if a change compromises our mission to help people find and follow Jesus, we will resist it.

All of this, of course, demands that we work and pray together and that we have a biblically-fired imagination. And in so doing, we will fulfill our mission to the glory of God. Do you understand what I'm saying, church? (Raise your hand.)

I want to close with these thoughts.

Jesus gave these parables about change to the religious leaders of his day. They thought they were right with God by fulfilling all the duties of the Law: going regularly to the Temple and doing their religious duty. But they totally missed what God was doing. A lot of people are like that today. They go to church regularly. They don't smoke. They don't drink. They don't cuss. They, along with everyone else, view themselves as a good person. But they're going to totally miss God.

You may be like that. You need a new "wineskin." God told the people in the Old Testament that when Christ came, he would give them a new heart – "a heart of flesh and not of stone" (Ezek. 36:26). Jesus put it this way: "You must be born again" (John 3:7). You see, going to church isn't going to save your soul any more than going to McDonald's will make you a Big Mac. You need a new heart. You receive that simply by acknowledging your need – your sin – and embracing Christ's death and resurrection on your behalf. The Scriptures say, "as many as received [Christ], to them [God] gave the authority to become the children of God." (John 1:12). We'd like to help you take that step of faith to receive Christ and the new heart that you need.

Prayer