



The Courage to Change

Psalm 16 & Ephesians 1:15-23

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Back in the mid-80's, Rev. Charles Carson was the interim pastor here at First Presbyterian. Not much survives from his tenure from those days, but I recently found a memo in my files that was both engaging and to the point. I shared the memo with the Session this past week because of its contents, but the opening illustration of the missive might be the most impressive part.

Carson told the following story:

Once upon a time, so I've read, a preacher gave the same sermon Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. Several elders asked him why he was doing this. His reply was two-fold: 1.) all members are not present every Sunday, and 2.) when those

who are present begin doing what he preaches then he will give his next sermon.

In short, the venerable elder pastor was saying that it seems to the congregation that many pastors are broken records, going down the same old paths and the comfortable proclamations that easily comes to mind. I, too, could be a case in point. Sometimes, it feels as if my sermons are always about the same thing: God's action in Jesus Christ.

Be that as it may, I'm not alone in this. I take particular comfort in the fact the great epistle-writer of the New Testament, Paul himself, did the very same thing! A reading through of his letters contained in scripture produces an eerie familiarity. He keeps saying the same thing over and over to the congregations to whom he wrote. And that is not such a bad thing indeed! Repetition is certainly one way that we learn and change and grow.

Paul's intent in this letter and in others, is to encourage his readers to look for the transformative work of God in Jesus Christ in their very lives. He calls them to lean not upon their own understandings, but to seek out the areas in their lives and in the life of their world where God is at work through what God has done in Christ. This action of God in Christ's life, death and resurrection has repercussions for all of human life, not just the standing of the individual before God or a quiet, individual relationship with God. Paul is convinced that God is at work for all humankind all throughout the workings of this world and human life. Paul sought to convey to his readers again and again the gospel of Jesus Christ, that in Christ, God has demonstrated that he is for them and not against them. This realization alone should cause the lives of people to change.

No less a brilliant theologian than Eugene Peterson put this transformation of which Paul wrote this way:

God is on our side; he is not against us. God is actively at work among us for our good and our salvation; he is not passive. God is present and personal; he is not remote. God is totally involved in the cosmos; he is not indifferent. ... We see what we have never seen before. We thought we were looking for God. No, God is looking for us. We thought we were seeking God. No, God is seeking us.

The operative statement here that I don't want you to miss, dear friends, is: 'We see what we have never seen before ...: In our engagement with the gospel of Jesus Christ, our eyes are opened to things that we had never seen before or thought before or experienced before. All of our assumptions about life and how God runs this world or how God rules the human heart are called into question when one really reads the scriptures, meditates upon them and allows one's own heart to be changed by what has been read there and what has been experienced. Our engagement with God in Jesus Christ should ultimately change our mind again and again.

But such change is hard for us; such growth causes pain and discomfort along the way, so we are tempted to abandon it and remain moving along well-traveled paths and easier climbs than the arduous and difficult task of change. But such is the call of our faith ...

My old friend, Peter Gomes, delivered a sermon to his congregation in Harvard University's Memorial Chapel that pointed to the transformative, but difficult power of the faith that we receive in Christ. Here's what he said:

Faith ought not to be what we last remember, the thing that we dare not let go of, the thing that allows us to resist all change, challenge, and confrontation, although all too often it is, and we know very well it is. That is why religious people, by and large, are so fundamentally conservative. Think about it. We are afraid of change. To change one's mind is thought of as a sign of instability and insecurity; to change one's mind is a dangerous thing because the whole center of the universe becomes unstuck. Yet change is the essence of growth, growth is essential to maturity, and maturity is essential to a dynamic faith.

The good doctor has it exactly right here: a truly living and dynamic faith in the God who has acted, is acting and will act in Jesus Christ must be open to change and transformation of the heart and soul. One's mind might actually be changed by the working of God upon one's heart and soul and mind.

This is the very desire that Paul held for his readers: that they might grow in Jesus Christ. He was convinced that human life was meant to be different and actually could be different precisely because of God had done in Jesus Christ. Paul encouraged his readers again and again to be, in essence, open to the movement of God's Spirit in their midst and in their lives.

On a personal note, my mind has changed over the years on a variety of topics that have confronted both the church and our common society. I've changed my views on such things as reproductive rights, sexual orientation, human gender, systematic economic deprivation, systematic racism, and nationalism to name just a few. However, what has changed the most about me and the faith that I now hold is found again in what Eugene Peterson said so well:

God is on our side; he is not against us. God is actively at work among us for our good and our salvation; he is not passive. God is present and personal; he is not remote. God is totally involved in the cosmos; he is not indifferent.

This is the crucial change in my worldview that came to me through reading of scripture and allowing the living Spirit of God to illuminate what I read, what I lived and how I approach life in general. This is the crucial change, knowing that God in Jesus Christ is for us and not against us. With that change in one's heart and soul, one becomes open to seeking out again and again where God is at work in one's own life and in the life of the world. In short, faith gives us the courage and facility to change. Paul said that this all has been done by the 'working of God's great power,' and he is absolutely right.

At the risk of sounding like a broken preaching record, let me conclude this sermon with the very wise words of dear old Peter Gomes who offered this to his congregation in very Pauline fashion:

I urge you to grow up. Do not be content with what you now think you know or feel to be absolutely the last word. Do not turn your face into a fossilized bit of private truth, for if you do, both it and you will turn into petrified stone. The life will have gone out of your face and out of you, and you will be preserved for all time; and what fun is there in being preserved for all time as a petrified pillar that has gone nowhere and is nowhere and is going nowhere? Grow into a deeper transforming knowledge of Christ's purpose for you and your life; and the only way you can do that is to open your hands, your heart, your mind, and your life. Never be satisfied with your own status quo, spiritual or otherwise. When you refuse to open yourself up to possibilities you die. Growth is the only infallible evidence of the life of faith, and that has to do, as Emerson once said, not with what lies behind us or with what lies before us, but with what lies within us.