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Change! When Will It Stop?

Psalm 51:10-12
Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

Every Sunday, as we begin the service, we say that this congregation is “dedicated to the transformation of head, heart and hands in the service of Christ.” We say that every Sunday, and the leadership of this congregation try to plan and work to make that simple tagline true in this community. The challenge is for all of us – as a collective body – to remember and embrace the fact that to say that we are disciples of Jesus Christ means that we must ALWAYS be in the process of transformation and change! If we are unwilling to be changed, then we must be honest and say that we are unwilling to be followers of Jesus Christ. The only way to live out our commitment to be followers of Jesus is to commit to change.

When we are young, we are excited by and long for change. But as we grow older, most of us at least, find comfort in sameness and we begin to look warily at change. We grieve what is lost in change, and we remember the good of what was before. And, if we are not careful, we begin to resist change and we can become calcified or hard. The reality is that while we can resist or bemoan change, we cannot control it. Change is the reality of the age into which we have been born. The ONLY choice we have is how we will react to the change.

The same is true of our faith. If we resist change – to what we believe, to how we serve, to the inclusion of new ways of service and the death of old ways of serving – then we cannot serve the living and dynamic God who rules the universe and in whose hands even radical change can be turned and used for good purpose. We are either growing or dying – goes an old saying. The same is true of faith. Either our faith is growing and so changes us, or we do not have faith.

Last September, the Elders and Deacons at FLPC gathered for an Officers’ Retreat, and we chose to focus our time on four values or virtues that – when we can live them and embody them – will transform us – head, heart and hands – into disciples of Christ who serve God’s purpose in the world. To live and to embody these values REQUIRE that we change. The values or virtues on which we focused our attention last September are: Generosity, Joy, Presence and Reconciliation. They are listed on the insert in the bulletins today, and I hope that you will take the insert home and use it for your own prayer and reflection. In many wonderful ways, this congregation already embodies these virtues. But, I have found these four virtues to be a very helpful and productive lens through which to review what we do as a church. How does our congregation encourage, teach and live in generosity and joy? How do we practice and encourage each other to be present to God and to each other? And where do we teach and

model reconciliation, in our own lives, in our congregation and in the community? It is a lofty goal, a humbling task, but without these high goals, we are no better than a social club or a random group of friends. To say that we are Disciples of Jesus means that we must embrace the process of being changed more and more into those who look, live and act like the Lord we say we follow. There is simply no other way.

So we work on being generous. FLPC is a very generous congregation already, so this is an easy place to begin to be transformed. How can we continue to grow in the virtue, grace and character of generosity? First, we need to say that generosity is connected to how much money we give, but it is not defined by how much money we give. Generosity is a way of living with our time, our gifts, our opinions and our very lives, before it is a way of living with our money. Generosity is a way of treating others – especially those with whom we disagree.

Things that prevent us from growing in generosity are fear and self-centeredness. It is much harder to be generous when we are afraid, so how do we reduce our fear? And when we are completely focused on our own needs, hurts and wants, we often don't even see opportunities to share or to give. So, to grow in generosity we must look up and away from our own feelings, wants and needs. In short, we must shift our focus from self to God. How have we been successful in that shift of focus from self to God? Let's do more of that.

How can we embody Joy? Joy is related to generosity, but not exactly the same thing. I don't know of your experience, but in my experience what some Christians call "salvation" doesn't result in joy. In some faith communities, members are more characterized by a self-satisfied assurance and believe themselves to be members of an exclusive club. That assurance is strengthened when we can point fingers at those who are not in the club. Too many people, who identify as followers of Jesus are angry, stingy, judgmental and resentful – the opposite of joyful. But Scripture lists joy as a result of loving God.

If we are not characterized by joy, then we need to ask ourselves if we really are followers of Jesus. Christian Joy doesn't mean that we can never be sad, worried, angry or depressed. There is much genuine evil and soul crushing suffering in the world for any sane person to be happy all the time. I am not talking about a Pollyanna faith or a faith that pretends that everything is ok. I am talking about living our lives – individually and collectively – in a way that is characterized (more often than not) by JOY. When things are good – JOY. When things are bad – JOY. Joy is not just being happy. Christian joy is having the freedom to celebrate God's eternal love and plan and to know that it applies to me – so I am free from worry, fear and judgment. That is the basic message of the two catechism questions we have used since the beginning of the season of Lent. We ARE God's Children, and that means that we are loved and claimed. When that message is claimed and believed, we can have Joy.

How do we practice PRESENCE? By the virtue of presence I mean to highlight the Christian practices that help us focus on God and the truth of God's Kingdom more than we focus on other things. Practically I mean the ability to be really present to people and to what is

happening in front of us and to see those things and people as God sees them. Presence – Attention – Mindfulness – How do we grow in our ability to be Present?

The opposite of presence is multi-tasking (which we are finding out is a myth anyway). So, when we are sitting in a room with others, but attending to our phones, the TV, or have our attention elsewhere, we are not present. So, the Christian virtue or practice of presence means becoming intentional about what will take our time and attention and deciding what will NOT take our time and attention. To be present to our loved ones, we must be absent from work and chores. To be present to God we must be absent from things like worry, self-justification, anger, resentment or fear. And to be present to God and others we must find and practice silence. We cannot be attentive to God or others if we are always talking. To be present to God and others we must give God and others space and time. If our schedules are so full that we cannot allot space to what is most important to us, then either our schedules must change, or we need to be honest with ourselves about what we really love. And finally, presence means that we must grow in our ability to give up our own schedules, agendas and control. Growth in faith means a move from “God do our will” to “God’s Will be done.”

This year, in an attempt to encourage presence, we continued our habit of leaving a few moments of silence before the prayer of confession and we held again Taize worship services on three consecutive Sunday nights where the emphasis is on silence and prayer and communion. The other practical place for many of us to begin to embody and live the virtue of presence is to practice a Sabbath – time away from work to attend to God and to those we love. As we withdraw our time and attention from work, worry and business and give it instead to what is true and good and eternal, we will be changed.

The final virtue we tried to focus on is RECONCILIATION. Of all the virtues we focused on in September, reconciliation seems to be both the most dangerous and difficult as well as the most critical. We are not the first generation to feel tension between allegiance to party, class, race or clan and allegiance to God and God’s Kingdom and Values. But, this tension seems sharper and clearer to me now than it was 20 years ago. I both fear and believe that into just this era we have been called to live, model and work of reconciliation in the world. This work does not come naturally, nor is it easy. In September, I listed for the Elders and Deacons practices that seem to me to support the word of reconciliation. Please allow me to repeat these today.

- Establishing and abiding by fair conflict practices. How we fight quickly reveals whether our goal is reconciliation or winning.
- Balancing our ministries of mercy (giving to those in need) with ministries of justice (working to change the realities that keep people in need). This is why our congregation’s participation in the MORE Justice network is important, but not easy.
- Refusing to allow ourselves or anyone else to confuse our partial opinions with God’s Word or Will. This is why ongoing Bible Study and its resulting humility is critical. If Bible Study doesn’t generate humility, then run from that study for its focus is not God.

- Cultivating an ability to see the image of God in every human being so that we refuse to assume that “the stranger” is always an enemy. We cannot be reconciled with those we have already decided are outside of God’s love and grace. This was one of the reasons we invited Imam Omar Shaheed and members of his Mosque for conversation during Lent.
- Honest self-evaluation that sees, names and takes responsibility for our own sin and imperfection. Think of the time and energy that will be freed up for others when we stop having to pretend that we are perfect. What a relief.
- Learning to listen and becoming more willing to “sit with” those who suffer and who are angry.

Scripture says that ultimately we will either be reconciled to God, or we will be lost. God’s intention in the world is reconciliation. The time has come for us to become better at reconciliation from our side of the divide.

Friends in Christ. Change will never stop until we are gathered into the Kingdom of God. Our goal is to be changed more and more into the likeness of Christ. If we refuse this change, then we must be honest with ourselves that we do not want to be followers of Christ. During one of the Taize worship services we held before Easter, I read a quote from the British theologian, C.S. Lewis, who describes the work of living the Christian life this way, and with which I’d like to end.

“We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system: because now we are letting Him work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or stain which soaks right through. He [Jesus] never talked vague, idealistic gas. When he said, “Be perfect,” He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder—in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad. May I come back to what I said before? This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else. It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, building, missions, holding services. . . . the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men [people] into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man [human] for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose. It says in the Bible that the whole universe was made for Christ and that everything is to be gathered together in Him.” [Mere Christianity].

May it begin with us!