

“How Does Change Happen?”
Acts 11:1-18
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It has become a cliché to say it, but it is still true that the seven most popular words in the church are – we never did it that way before. Change, particularly significant change, is never easy for individuals or communities, and in the church where we can add the word “sacred” to the word “tradition” change simply becomes that much more difficult.

Of course, change is the only true constant in the world. Even the God who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow changes God’s mind in response to human actions in the books of Genesis and Jonah. And some changes are absolutely critical for the church – in terms of making sure we are in synch with God’s will and making sure we still exist in the future.

I have shared with some of you before an old Fred Craddock story. Young Fred pastored a small-town church that struggled to find new members. When a new industry came to the area bringing new workers, Fred asked the church to reach out to these people because they needed a church, the church needed new members and we are called to reach out.

The church leaders refused, saying, “These folks are not our kind of people.” They were factory workers who lived in a trailer park. They were new to the community and different from the town folk. Fred pleaded his case biblically, pragmatically — trying desperately to get them to change their minds — to no avail. The leaders were there long before the preacher boy and they would be there long after he left.

Years later, an older Fred Craddock, now a distinguished homiletics professor, came to town and when he drove up, he saw that the parking lot at that church was packed. When he walked inside, he saw that every pew was full. It was a wonderful sight! Of course, it was now a barbeque restaurant. The church had died years before. Fred said he thanked God it was a restaurant because if it had still been that church, most of the people in the room would not have been welcome.

Churches can refuse to change, but there may be a cost to that refusal, a high cost. The question is – how do we know when a specific change is one we need to make? How do we get everyone onboard or at least keep the church together through significant change? How does change, even necessary change, happen?

The good news is this has been a long-standing challenge for the church. So, there is a lot of history to inform our practice, beginning with the story we have read today from Acts 11. Here we witness the early church facing the possibility of a difficult change – extending the Gospel beyond the boundaries of Jewish people to include Gentiles. This may seem like a forgone conclusion to us, but it is not at the time. Many early believers oppose this movement, and if they prevail, people like us would probably not be Christians today. Thus, the particular issue at hand has implications for us, but the broader trajectories of the story offer much to inform our understanding of change in general today.

One thing we see in this story is that change happens in the church when someone moved by the Spirit has the courage to act. We like to think that if a change is important and we allow time for dialogue and understanding, things will go smoothly, and there is no question that education and communication are important. We like to think there is such a thing as timing or readiness. There may be no perfect time, but some times are better than others for some changes. And exercising care about such things is important. I have often said that different strategies are required by those who would be change agents as opposed to witnesses to the truth, to you-know-where with the consequences.

But the truth is some changes are not easy to face even with the most thorough education and communication. And not only will there be no perfect time for some changes, people may never think they are ready. If our culture had waited until everyone embraced the idea of integration, we would still live in a segregated society. And if the church had listened to those who didn't think it was time to consider such matters, the church would still not have done so. I had members in

my last two settings who told me to look at the birds - cardinals and blue jays live separate lives; so should people of different races. Really?!

If we are waiting for just the right time when change will bring no stress at all, we will never change. If this concerns something minor, like what color we paint a room, that may be “O.K.” but if it concerns something central to our faith, like the dignity of all people, it is not “O.K.” So, waiting to consider a change under the pretense of preserving the peace with better timing may not be noble or wise.

Peter doesn't wait. He doesn't begin with a desire to share the Gospel with Gentiles. He only does this when God speaks to him through a vision about clean and unclean animals. This is described in Acts 10. Peter resists the message, saying he has always kept kosher, he has never eaten forbidden food. But God is not talking about food. God is talking about people, who is clean and unclean, whether the Gospel is just for the Jews, or if Gentiles should be included.

Peter has held to traditional thinking about this too, that it is only for Jews, but God says otherwise and then sends three men to confirm the message. So, Peter is convinced that this change is of God, and he sets out to share the Gospel with a centurion in Caesarea named Cornelius and his household. Once Peter receives the vision, he doesn't wait. He doesn't assess whether it is the right time. He doesn't consult his fellow Apostles. He just goes because he is convinced that God is calling him to go. Sometimes it is as simple as that.

Now, I am not proposing this as a way to do church business on a regular basis. I am a process-oriented person, as I trust you know by now. But we can be paralyzed by analysis. Sometimes someone just has to have the courage to act.

I think of the coffeehouse ministry my former church in Winston-Salem had back in the 60's and 70's to connect with huge numbers of high school and college students. It was cutting edge then. There were lots of questions, particularly once it got started and some deacons had to pick up beer bottles on Sunday mornings. But the ministry created community for hundreds of young people, some of whom led the church when I was there thirty years later, and by then people looked back on that scandalous venture as one of the finest mission enterprises of the

church. Change happens when someone moved by the Spirit has the courage to act.

Another thing we see in this story, though, is that when the change is significant, and sometimes even when it is not, there is resistance, but there is a way to address it. This is where we join the story today. The text says that when the apostles and believers in Judea hear that the Gentiles have accepted the word of God, they criticize Peter, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

It is telling that this is the way they frame the question. There are surely concerns about Peter witnessing and preaching to Gentiles and then baptizing them, but what the critics focus on is his table fellowship with them. This has something to do with the central role food plays in the purity code of Judaism at the time, but there is also something about eating with someone that evokes a sense of intimacy and it is intimacy with the other that we fear most whether the difference is cultural, racial, religious or socioeconomic. We divide the world between “us” and “them” and we don’t want to do anything too intimate with “them.”

Peter has defied tradition and the others were not included in his vision from God. They haven’t even heard about it yet. So, they react in an understandable way, saying, “Peter, what are you doing? Have you lost your mind?” To his credit, Peter is not defensive. He knows he thought just like them not that long ago. So, he explains, step by step, what has happened, why he has gone. God spoke to him through a vision, he went and preached, and as he was preaching, the Spirit fell upon the people just as the Spirit fell on Pentecost. So, how could he refuse them baptism? How could he refuse them fellowship?

At this point, the text says the critics are convinced. They praise God and say, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” The issue is not completely resolved. The phrase “even the Gentiles” hints at this reality. There is a major church conference in Acts 15 about this same issue, and the truth is it takes decades and decades to sort out the matter. But the initial resistance is addressed in a healthy manner and the church moves forward together.

In like manner, change often meets resistance today, but there are healthy ways to address resistance and move forward together. I have

told some of you about a project in the church I served in Richmond, Virginia that seemed pretty straightforward but inspired heated debate. We had a good bit of land and thus proposed using some of it to start a community garden. There had been a lot of process and communication. The goals were to grow food for people in need, build community among those who worked in the garden and enable children in a nearby housing project to learn about gardening and get connected to the land.

The proposal had been well-received, but at the conference where we voted on it, there were some strong criticisms that didn't make much sense and came from people we expected to love the idea. But they knew less about the project then and hadn't had time to process it, and it was a different way of using some space.

In the end, the church voted to move forward, we developed the garden and the man who had expressed the strongest resistance actually came and talked to me a few weeks later, saying he had thought about it further, supported the project and was sorry he had made such a fuss. I told him not to worry about the last part of what he said. He was simply expressing his thoughts at the time. He didn't need to feel sorry.

Change happens when someone moved by the Spirit has the courage to act. There may be resistance, but it can be addressed.

Yet there is one other thing we see in this story – if the change is of God, it will come to pass and we are wise to embrace it. Peter knows it is God who speaks to him through the vision. And if he has any doubts, the fact that men show up with news that Cornelius has heard a similar message from God must encourage him. And then, the Holy Spirit falls on the people while he is preaching to them. How could anyone not realize this broadening of the church to include Gentiles is of God?

The message for us is that if something is of God, we ought to embrace it. The obvious question is – how do we know whether some proposed change, in terms of whom we include in church life or how we do church, is of God? The question becomes more complicated when different people claim to hear different things from God about the same subject. And we have become quite adept at using God language to make our point. It is more persuasive to say, “I sense God leading me to

believe thus and such” than to say, “I think this is right.” But it can also be manipulative, which is why some of us use God language sparingly. Someone shared this bit of verse with me years ago.

There were the Scots who kept the Sabbath
and everything else they could get their hands on.

Then there were the Welsh who prayed on their knees
and on their neighbors.

Thirdly there were the Irish who did not know what they wanted
but were always ready to fight for it.

Lastly there were the English who considered themselves
a self-made nation, thus relieving the Almighty of a dreadful
responsibility.

There are many dreadful responsibilities of which the Almighty needs to be relieved. We need to be very careful in talking about Divine intent.

Yet we must seek it, and perhaps the best criterion for assessment is whether something matches what we know of the character of God. We can’t always go on precedent, what the church has thought in the past, because our understanding may have been inaccurate or limited. But we can trust the basic character of God we see in Jesus.

We know that God is loving and kind, ever gracious and willing to extend mercy. We know that God is righteous and just, ever caring for the weak and the stranger. And we know that God is ever extending the boundaries of the beloved community, seeking to include more and more people. New ideas which square with these realities may be of God.

If all else fails, we might consider the wisdom of Gamaliel, a Pharisee described in Acts 5 who made this argument when Peter and the others were apprehended for talking about Jesus. “Why don’t you leave these men alone?” he said. “If what they are doing is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”

It is a sobering word and a helpful one. If some new thing or idea is of God, it will thrive, and we don’t really want to hinder it.