

Rev Dr Rebecca L. Kiser
Wrong Relationship with... CHANGE
3/21/2021 Lent 5b

Happy Spring! One year ago was our 1st Sunday online, and not in our sanctuary! The last sermon preached inside was on Mar 15, and Fred Harle was the preacher. I was in SC at my sister's house, when suddenly everything changed - our governor closed almost everything but essential services, and I cut things short to get back and figure out how in the world we were going to continue to worship and keep in touch with each other. I knew Facebook Live was a thing but had never done it, I'd been on calls with FaceTime, and I'd attended a couple Zoom meetings because folks were all scattered and it saved travel expenses. How to get us together in a way most of us could access was the issue. On my long drive back, gas stations wouldn't let one in to use the restrooms, although you could get gas; I found a hotel open but their dining room was closed. I hit New York's border and was greeted by flashing signs on the freeway saying "Stay Home," and "Wear Masks." It all felt really, really weird. We went from hearing about Covid 19 in other countries, to hearing about a few cases in Washington state, and suddenly New York City blew up with cases and we were in a full-fledged pandemic. Everything changed - and for everybody, all at the same time.

Change happens. In fact, in what sounds like a nonsensical statement, change is a constant. The words "change" and "constant" just don't go together - yet it's true. Change is a given if we're alive. People say that the only things that don't change are death and taxes - but change itself is always happening. On the cellular level, cells are constantly dying and being replaced. I asked Google how long it takes for our whole body of cells to be replaced, and discovered that there are a few cells that don't ever die and get replaced, like in our cerebellum and in the lenses of our eyes. Everywhere else, though, cells are constantly dying and being renewed. Our blood cells live only 70 -120 days - so every 3 months or so our blood is all different cells. An average skin cell lives only about 14 days. The lining of our intestines changes every 5 days. So our bodies, even after we're all grown up, are ever-changing.

Relationships change; marriages change; friendships develop and change over the years; our relationships with our parents change, and our relationships with our children change.

As we age, life changes when we break a hip, or have a shoulder replacement; or our hearing or eyesight worsens. Life changes both when we marry and when a spouse dies; life changes when any loved one dies. Life changes when we move, or leave a job or take a new job. Our country's Senate and House change every 2 years with how the elections go. Life changes when a beloved pastor goes, and again when a new pastor comes in.

See what I mean? Things are always changing as a part of life going on. To resist change is ultimately futile - change happens. Hating change is a waste of energy.

Okay, okay, God doesn't change; God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. (Actually, though, there are some stories in the Hebrew Scriptures where, like, Abraham bargains with God, and gets God to change God's mind) Yet God never varies in love for creation and humanity, and is a keeper of all promises forever.

But just because God doesn't change doesn't mean that religion doesn't change, or faith doesn't change. We humans are part of that relationship with God, and as we learn and grow, as we change, our relationship with God changes. We wrestle with hard things and reach a resolution that lasts until the next hard thing we wrestle with. Faith stays faith, although it morphs and evolves as we grow in our knowledge and wisdom. And that happens in individuals as well as in larger communities like the church. As our love and dedication to God endures through the thick and thin of years, we may continue to be dedicated to God, while how that lives out in us changes.

We have to know how to live with change; we have to know when it's time for change; and we have to know what needs to change and what doesn't. Some people seem to be able to live with more change than others. I had one child, for example, that fell apart if I said, "Okay, it's time to get your coat and go to the grocery store." He was so focused on what he was doing that I learned to give him a 10 minute warning, a 5 minute warning and a 2 minute warning before I said, "Grab your coat." He had a very hard time when we moved from WI to VA, even though we let him get in the moving truck and see his bed there, bought a kid's book about moving, and had even taken trips before. He continued to have a more difficult time with transitions off and on through his life growing up, although he eventually learned to adapt to changes more easily.

I had a boss that I really, really liked when I worked in the Presbytery of Eastern VA. One time I teased him about how neatly organized his truck bed was, with a tool box thing across it, and items in there separated and in individual boxes. He responded, "Life is so chaotic and messy, that I need some orderly things to balance it all out." True that! We do need some things we can trust to remain true and orderly - for a lot of people in this chaotic and changing world, they look to at least their church staying the same. When church needs to change, they get really thrown; they react angrily, they complain, they say it;s never been done that way before, and resist, resist, resist.

For those of us wanting church to be the way we've always known it, for those of us who want to sing the same hymns we sang as children, for those of us who want the way we know

how to do church to go on -- change in our church is tough. Jesus reminds us yet again in today's text, in some words that are difficult to hear, "*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*" (Jn 12; 24-25)

Using the metaphor of the way a seed splits itself and dies in its seed form, before, "the roots go down and the stem goes up," Jesus reminds us that death is a part of the process of new life - there's no new life and fruitfulness without a death of the old forms. The spiritual truth is that when we try to hang on and "save our life," we lose it. If we try to stay as a seed, the fruitfulness never comes.

I hope I haven't harped on this too much lately - isn't it funny how the assigned lectionary texts seep saying this over and over? It probably has something to do with Jesus' approaching death and resurrection...hmm... a spiritual principle illustrated in his life, death and resurrection. We see that principle in the way that a seed dies to give energy to a new plant, or caterpillars go into the chrysalis stage before coming out as butterflies, or snakes have to shed their skins so they can grow. And we see it in Jesus' death and resurrection to a new form of life. And we see it in how we all live and grow.

In just a couple hours, we're going to gather again on Zoom and brainstorm about how our beloved church here needs to change to move into our future, how our form may need to adapt, our ways of "doing" church may need to evolve. Hopefully we've all been praying for this whole transitional time for God to guide us and lead us into a new birth of sorts. Especially I asked us all to pray hard and listen hard this week, in preparation for these visioning sessions. We can't continue to do what we've always done and expect to get different results - we're at a place where we need a renewed vision. Interim ministry is all about that renewal of vision; it's a transition to a new time. That's what we're in - a transition, or to use religious words, we're in a time of discernment.

I want to share with you all here a little bit of the pastor's point of view, or overview, or the shepherd's view, of a church community and what makes up the life of a church. We're going to go into it a bit more this afternoon before we begin our visioning and brainstorming. In today's meeting, by the way, nothing is too far out to speak aloud - and there's no nay-saying permitted! We're gathering the pieces of the vision. It's important that we as a congregation develop this vision so it is "ours", and not someone else's vision imposed on us. It's important so we look for the right personality and skills of our next pastor.

Churches have several component parts working together - we're not just an organisation per se. We are first of all people who have become Christ-followers, seeking to continue his work and his call to come into the blessings of God's realm. We organize simply in order to further our dedication, do our work, and fulfill our call. If we look at it this way, we can see that using different methods doesn't change the ultimate mission; we're simply adapting to the folks who need to hear and receive God's healing.

Our work together is first of all to keep our faith growing and strong in the face of the hardships of living in a world that seeks to crucify God. We seek to deepen the faith of our community here, and support each other in living a life of faithfulness and fruitfulness. We historically do this through worship, through classes and spiritual practices, through retelling the story of our Savior, Jesus the Christ. And since we are called to serve, we gather in order to use our common resources to bring the healing and love of Christ to address the needs of the world's people and by this show God's love and care. We love one another, and we broaden that love to include those whom God brings to our doors. We seek to see where the Holy Spirit is working, and join the Spirit there. We expect our horizons and understandings to grow and deepen, and that new generations may see further than the predecessors about the needs and hurts and wounds of people.

This afternoon I'll break it down into how we grow and nurture and care for the believers, how we serve the neighborhood where God has placed us as well as the world; how we become ready to tell of the faith we have to others, and then to welcome and assimilate new folks into this community. Along the way, we interact with the highest ideals of love, of transparency and honesty in our dealings with each other and our finances. Maintaining our place of worship and the facilities where we can do these things becomes important, too, although we would still be the church if we met in houses or storefronts or out under the trees. So many churches get caught up in the maintenance of a facility and use their resources up on that, to the neglect of the real meat of our call.

Reviewing our purposes and renewing our vision is important in our ongoing story, bringing all the aspects of being a church of Jesus Christ back into balance.

I urge all of us to join in this afternoon and share with your community what you have heard God whisper in your prayers or in your hearts. May we, with Jesus our Savior, submit to what has to die in order to bear fruit, and welcome the changes. AMEN.

What I want to say today is more about the discernment process, acknowledging again “those who love their life will lose it., and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” And the grain having to die before it can bear fruit.....

What is church anyway? Remember from when I first came. Many of us come regularly and partake of the benefits of community, friendship, thoughtfulness about faith, learning to give and serve in a gentle way. There are places to get more involved and help in planning events, or teach, or serve in the leadership.

There's a lot that goes into being a church of Jesus Christ.

1. We assume folks are either Christ-followers or at least interested in or considering becoming a Christ-follower. Or perhaps they are in inner turmoil of some kind, and need a safe place to reflect, and friends to be present for them. I would assume that those selected for leadership have a deep commitment to following Christ and are letting God change their lives and hearts.
2. A major part of being a church is welcoming people at whatever stage they are, and providing both factual learning about Scripture and our traditions, as well as formation of the character and life such as prayer and piety. These would be called ministries of Christian Education and Formation, as a follow-up to ministries of Hospitality and Welcome
3. As Christ-followers, we are called to share the message of God's kingdom, and to continue Jesus' work of service to the hurting, the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the suffering. So one of the major parts of being the church is engaging in works of service and love. While folks CAN & DO get involved on their own, the church also undertakes to provide opportunities to work together in mission projects. These would then be ministries of evangelism and mission.
4. Another part of the work of the church is discipleship through stewardship and giving. While we do educate people about this spiritual practice, we then have the obligation to be both responsible and transparent with how we handle the offerings entrusted to our use. This would be the ministry of Stewardship.
5. One of the main things we do as a church is to gather for worship through word, music, prayer and sacrament. There are a lot of details to care for, the colors, the speakers, the equipment , the thoughtfulness of celebrating various seasons of the church year, special services, having the bread and cup ready, having ushers to welcome and lay readers. Providing for the continuation of worship with pastoral leadership and engaging the participation of our congregation are the ministry of worship.

6. We also nurture relationships between Christ-followers, for mutual support, mutual growth, and care for each other when we are in times of trial. We do this through ministries of Fellowship which encourage us to know and love one another, and ministries of Caring.
7. For housing our education and formation ministries, and for providing a place dedicated to worship of God, most churches have buildings to build, maintain and provide for. Ministry of property, we could call this. And as our organization is recognized by the government, we have Trustees.
8. Belonging to the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Methodist Churches, we practice a certain connectedness to the other churches in our area, and in our nation, and around the globe. We believe that we are all Christ-followers together, and that there are missions we can do better as a larger group - things like colleges, seminaries, supporting mission workers overseas, and such. So we have financial involvement as well as participation in our local presbytery and district. We organize ourselves with those who count and take in the gifts, and those who disburse.

So you see there's a lot encompassed in being a church! We elect leaders to help us consider these areas of ministry, and make plans on our behalf. It sometimes makes us feel that the church is just another organization, but that's not true. We are not the Rotary or the Lions, we are not Eastern Star or another non-profit. The Church is not dependent on buildings, a certain committee structure, a certain form of worship, or graded Sunday School classes for Christian ed. Rather, the Church exists whenever and wherever Christ-followers gather. How we organize ourselves is up to us - how we design a way to work together and carry out our goals is up to us. Churches can meet in storefronts or outside under the trees. Churches can meet over dinners or at a skateboard park or repairing the houses of the needy or feeding the homeless or marching in a protest. Churches can meet in living rooms. Churches can have professionally educated clergy or take turns preaching around the room, finding out who has gifts for what. Jesus said that wherever 2 or 3 are gathered, he is in the midst of them.

Through the years that there has been a Christian Church, we've sort of narrowed things down to certain formats - ie a building, classes for learning, worship services, mission projects and so on. But none of that is outlined in the Bible as "the way to do church." These various areas ARE part of growing as a Christ-follower, but how we address these parts of the faithful life is up to what works well for us. I know there's a certain security in knowing how to do things, and having a structure that is widely shared. BUT...BUT...we can actually be the church in any way we design to follow Jesus and make God known.

The important thing is that these areas of the Christian life are addressed. Otherwise, we can get over involved in our building to the detriment of, say, teaching and forming changed lives. Or we can get over involved in maintaining the details of worship and forget about doing mission. Or we can get over involved in caring for folks we know and like, and forget to be inviting and incorporating new folks. We can get out of balance; we can get stuck and stale; we can get preoccupied and lopsided.

These kinds of visioning times, like we will be doing this Sunday afternoon and next, are times when we can look together at how we are addressing all these areas of what Churches are and what churches do. We can take an honest look at what we do well, and what we need some improvement in, and figure out how to get back in balance. We can listen to what the Spirit has been whispering to our folks, what the Spirit has been laying on hearts, what has been drawing folks spiritual attention - and discern where God is leading us.

John 12:20-36

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. ³⁴The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" ³⁵Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. ³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Psalm 51

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Hebrews 5:1-10

⁵Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; ³and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. ⁴And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; ⁶as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” ⁷In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,

¹⁰having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

