

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
“ACCEPTING CHANGE”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
March 29, 2009
John 12:20-33
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services

Jesus established a great reversal at the heart of the gospel. He won by losing. Jesus brought people to God, not by breaking their will, but by winning their hearts. His suffering love has drawn more people to him than all the strong-armed leaders this world has ever known.

The growing child goes through dramatic changes. A child is very different at six than at four. Day by day these changes are barely noticeable, but the wise parent sees them and makes appropriate adjustments, giving a bit more autonomy and responsibility as the child seems ready for them. Love remains, but love's expressions change.

On your journey to the cross you may notice that something in us seems to resist change. All changes, even those we desire, involve a degree of grief. Changes always mean leaving behind a part of ourselves. In January we observed some of the many changes that took place in the family of the new President, Barack Obama. One morning two little girls were driven in sleek, black limousines to completely new schools. It was exciting to think about the incredible new world these sisters were entering. We have little idea, however, about what they were leaving, the many people and places to which they said goodbye. Change brings the challenging necessity of saying “**hello**” and saying “**goodbye**.” Yet change cannot be avoided, and without change we cannot grow. Are you ready for change?

Perhaps no one in history has experienced as much change in a relatively short period of time as Jesus. In the 20th chapter of John's Gospel we read of Jesus' “**triumphal entry**” into Jerusalem and of his explanation to his disciple that he must die. It was the feast of Passover and the city was full of

pilgrims. Some Greek-speaking pilgrims, who were Gentiles, approached Philip and asked to see Jesus. Philip and Andrew both had Greek names and were from a Greek-speaking region of Galilee. The request finally reached Jesus. In response, Jesus said, ***“The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.”*** Jesus, of course, would not be glorified by the adulation of a larger following, but by the painful rejection of his own people. These Greeks, who had come to Jerusalem for Passover were inquirers or proselytes interested in Judaism. With Gentiles seeking Jesus, the time had come for Jesus to go to the cross in order to provide a basis for the redemption of the whole world. Was that the change he wanted?

Jesus’ death was a redemptive act for all. But it was also a demonstration of the meaning of discipleship. Death, the dying to one’s self, is the way to true life. Jesus used an illustration from nature. The seed must fall into the ground and die in order to produce fruit. Discipleship as a dying to self means serving God and the world by following Jesus. Wherever Jesus is lifted up in suffering love, as he was on the cross, he has the power to draw the world to himself. ***“If I be lifted up from the earth I will draw all men unto me.”***

When Jesus’ hour came, he did not welcome it. The idea that Jesus was a supernatural being to whom suffering and death were not threatening cannot be supported by the biblical witness or historical evidence. The Incarnation means that Jesus was completely and fully human. He was as much of God as could be expressed in human form, but nevertheless he was human. The Gospels bear witness to his humanity as being like our own. He was severely tempted in the desert. He lost his temper. He wept. He had a sense of humor. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed that he might not have to drink the ***“cup”*** of suffering and death he was facing. How did he do it? What was his secret? Well, he had no secret. He did it out of obedience to God. He believed that God’s will is always best, even when he was not sure how. The most important thing in his life was his devotion to God. He trusted God completely. From this side, Jesus could only see rejection, humiliation, and a painful death. He trusted God for whatever was beyond.

With the blessed advantage of hindsight, we see the consequence of Jesus’ willingness to accept the cross. Something of cosmic significance has occurred. Such a change has transpired that things will never be quite the same again. The whole New Testament ***“throbs and rings with the sense***

**that the line between expectation and fulfillment has been crossed.”
(Manson)**

Euripides, four hundred years before Christ, said, **“All is change; all yields its place and goes.”** Another ancient thinker, Socrates, may have given this truth a more positive spin: **“Nothing ever is, but all things are becoming.”** Does the highway of change run up or down? Does change mean utter destruction or growth toward fulfillment? Is **“the best”** somewhere behind us, or is it **“yet to be”**? The resurrection of Christ allows us to believe that there is always more life in tomorrow than in yesterday. The risen Christ bids us see the essence of change, not as death, but as metamorphosis.

Andre Gide, in his autobiography, *If It Die*, tells of his experience with a caterpillar when he was a boy. When the caterpillar had spun its chrysalis, he kept it in a small uncovered box and examined it every day. One day he touched it with the nib of his pen and saw little convulsive movements. Gide writes, **“On that day as Monsieur Tabourel was correcting my sums, my eyes fell on the box. What did I see? Wings! Great green and pink wings beginning to stir and quiver! . . . ‘Oh, Monsieur Tabourel! Look! Oh, if I had only known . . .’ I stopped short just in time for what I had been meaning to say was, ‘If I had only known that while you were explaining those deadly sums, one of the mysteries of life, so great a one, so long expected, was going on at my elbow!’”** The tutor said, **“What, didn’t you know that a chrysalis is the envelope of a butterfly? It’s perfectly natural.”** Gide says, **“Indeed, I knew my natural history . . . But because it was natural, could he not see it was marvelous?”**

The last years of the Rev. Henry Francis Lyte were unhappy, largely on account of his health. His last parish was Brixham, on the south coast of England, where he was minister for twenty three years. On his last Sunday there he wrote the text of the hymn **“Abide with Me,”** the second stanza of which reads: **“Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day; / Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away; / Change and decay in all around I see; / O thou who changest not, / Abide with me.”**

All of us can be agents of change. By centering our lives in Christ we become witnesses to his peace, power, and love. As Christ is lifted up, the lives of people are changed and we ourselves are blessed. The great irony is

as St. Francis of Assisi said: **“it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”**

I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church. Come grow your spirit with us. Center your life on Christ and accept the change that he brings.