

## CHANGE IS INEVITABLE, PROGRESS IS OPTIONAL

Sermon preached at

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John 15:12-17

I am coming out of the pulpit and taking off my robe, and that is a change. We need to talk honestly about change today. We are experiencing the kind of change in our church and in our world that was described by one theologian quoting Psalm 46, our Call to Worship, as the “shaking of the foundations.” And in the midst of these major changes I have had eye-opening, transformative, “Aha!” experiences that I can only verbalize as resurrection. And I need to share those with you and be completely honest with you.

The first of these revelations has to do with our finances.

In the midst of our financial crisis that is forcing us to make hard decisions today at our Annual Meeting, I have felt tremendous guilt. I have felt that I have led us into this crisis by a series of mistakes, including the building of Amistad Hall. Some of you have poo-pooed that, and others have encouraged me to believe it. And up until just a few weeks ago I was happy to accept that guilt. But guilt always comes with a price. And the price of this guilt has been an incredibly heavy burden that has driven me to my knees. So much so that I have been feeling like a failure and contemplating leaving the ministry. The result has been that I have not been a good pastor for you in the past year. So I owe you an apology for the poor leadership I have given during this time.

But I truly believe in resurrection, in standing up again, as I preached about on Easter. I believe in the power of newness and forgiveness, and I have felt that power, that resurrection, that unburdening in a new way. Here is why:

At a program on fund-raising put on by the Center on Philanthropy of Indiana University and the United Church of Christ, we learned that those churches that have been hardest hit by the recession, that have had to cut back and make hard decisions, have been the successful, growing churches. It is those who have taken risks and set themselves for growth by increasing their staff, facilities and budgets. That puts us in the amazing company of large churches, even mega-churches, that are very different from this church, but who take the future very seriously.

Small churches, those used to surviving, not growing, not taking risks, are the churches that have been least affected by the recession.

That was amazing information for me. It tells me that we were not on the wrong path. We have been doing things right. This doesn't mean we don't need to make some changes. We do. We need to live within our means. We need to be more concerned about our core values and mission. And I need to be much more diligent in my role as Chief Steward, overseeing our finances. But what it means for me is that we are not so much facing a crisis as facing an opportunity; an opportunity to continue the important ministry that we have started. Last week Jane used the

image of pruning that bears more and better fruit. And that is what we need to do. This is what the discernment process is about. We will spend the next year discerning the tap root, God's root, and prune away all that is not central to who we are as a church. That process begins today at our meeting. And I am very hopeful about this.

But there is a second revelation, a second resurrection I have had. It comes from the book, *The Emerging Church: How Christianity is Changing and Why* by Phyllis Tickle. This book gave me a larger perspective, a perspective that all Christians need right now. It opened my eyes to where we are, not only as a local church, but as a universal church as well.

We all have felt that something has changed over the past years. The Church, this church and others, are not as they used to be. But this is not particular to us. Something is different about Christianity itself. Think about some of the changes that have occurred just in the past 15 years that I have been your pastor.

1. Consider the latest polls:
  - a. Half of all US adults have changed religions.
  - b. New England is now the least religious part of the country.
  - c. More people now say they are not affiliated with any church than at any other time in history.
2. People have moved from being "Religious" to being "Spiritual."
3. And consider these cultural shifts:
  - a. 15 years ago only one sport practiced on Sunday mornings, now 11 do.
  - b. There is now a need for Evolution Sunday because the perception of Christianity has changed to be anti-intellectual.
  - c. And aggressive atheism has taken on a new public life.

How many of you have felt one or more of those changes? And we all know how hard change is; especially in the "Land of Steady Habits;" especially for Congregationalists. Do you know how many Congregationalists it takes to change a light bulb? WHAT? CHANGE?!!

D.H. Lawrence pointed out that what people fear most are new experiences, mainly because they displace old experiences. And in our day and time we are displacing like crazy. And the way we are doing that is through a giant Rummage Sale.

How many of you like rummage sales? How many of you hate them? Personally, I love them. It is an opportunity to discard some unwanted stuff, have some social interaction and make a few dollars in the process. The way I see it, everyone wins. But not everyone likes rummage sales.

Did you know that every 500 years the Church has a giant rummage sale, selling off its unwanted and outdated ideas, and going through a major change? Think about it. 500 years ago the **Reformation** took place and Protestantism as we know it was invented. 500 years earlier was the **Great Schism** where there were 3 Popes and the Oriental, Orthodox and Roman churches split from one another, changing Christianity in the process. 500 years before that the **Fall of Rome** took place, changing Christianity into a monastic religion. And 500 years before that **Jesus** lived and the **fall of the Temple** took place, ushering in Christianity itself. If we go back 500 years

before that we arrive at the **Babylonian Captivity**, and 500 more takes us to the establishment of the **Davidic dynasty** and the building of the first temple.

Every 500 years a major change takes place. And guess what? WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF ONE OF THOSE 500-YEAR CHANGES! We are in the midst of something much larger than a recession. And it is disconcerting. It is shaking the foundations of our very being, the earth is changing, the sea is roaring and foaming. And we are called to be still and know that God is God.

But instead of being still, we have been doing everything in our power to resist this change. We think that if only did the things we did in the 1950's when the church was thriving, we would be OK. If only we went back to basics, back to the way things USED to be. But there is no going back. We live in the most technologically advanced, computer-literate, connected age in the history of the world. We live in an age of Globalization, Information, and Technology.

But the church has not kept up with these movements. One person said it this way: "We are trying to reach the iPod generation with an 8-track tape mentality." How many of you know what an 8-track tape is? See how out of touch we are? And how many of you know the 7 last words of the church: WE'VE NEVER DONE IT THAT WAY BEFORE!

Raise your hand if you are under 20. Under 30. Under 40. Do you know what that means? We are one to two generations away from extinction. Young people are not joining our churches. They are not interested. And in order to survive the future, we must adapt. Christianity must change, and it is changing. Change is inevitable, but progress is optional.

Can you imagine what the Christianity of the future might look like? Based on what is being sold off in the current rummage sale, Phyllis Tickle offers a possible glimpse.

1. It will cast a wide net. It will be an inclusive church. It will offer Jesus' radical welcome to those who have not felt welcome in the church before, including youth, young adults, gays and lesbians, those who are "Spiritual but not religious," and those who aren't sure what they believe, if anything.

A national survey of youth said that they find the Church judgmental, hypocritical, and anti-gay. Young people see the world differently than we do, just ask Kim. The church of the future will be genuine, honest and inclusive, casting a wide net.

2. It will cast that wide net because it will be based not on a physical space, but on a network of people. We will be meeting, sharing, talking and experiencing our faith in a variety of ways, much like many are doing over the internet.

I have a very disconcerting prediction. I predict that in another 15-25 years these pews will not be here. And it will be for one of 2 reasons. The hopeful reason is that we will have realized that in order to incarnate our network of people, to have more participatory worship, our straight, hard, non-movable pews will not work. We will need new possibilities, just as we did in 1836, 1901 and 1957 when we remodeled.

The sad reason that there will not be pews is that the church will have become so irrelevant, so far behind, that it will become a museum, probably run by Yale University as an Amistad Museum. Lots of people will come to this building; not for a hopeful future, but to learn about the past.

3. It will be highly participatory. In other words, it will not be the way we do church today where I talk and you listen. It will be interactive, active, responsive, and behavior based. It will be about transforming the world, making a difference.  
Did you know that any one of the four elementary schools in Farmington gives more to missions than we do as a church, and engages a larger percentage of its children and families in community service? We are getting out-churched by the community. We aren't keeping up, we're being left in the dust. Other institutions and groups are doing what churches used to do – including malls.  
The young people of today have the ability and the desire to change the world. And what do we do as a church? We do a little of that, but spend most of our time, and certainly all of our Annual Meetings, arguing about a budget and process and bylaws and power and who's in and who's out and who is important. And we wonder why young people don't want to attend our meetings or get involved. They want to transform the world.
4. It will look more like early Christianity, before Constantine, before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Back when it was not dominant. It will be more about mystery, paradox and story rather than belief. It will be much more holistic, more Jewish. There will be no litmus test of doctrine.

Have you ever seen the movie City Slickers? Billy Crystal is talking with Jack Palance and Jack says "Do you know what the secret of life is? One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest means nothing." Crystal asks, "But what is that one thing?" and Palance's reply is, "That is what YOU have to find out." For Jesus that one thing is LOVE. What is basic to Christianity is that we love each other. The future Christianity will be defined not by what we believe, not by denomination, not by the church we belong to, but by how we act, how we show love to our neighbor. And in a global world our neighbor is everyone.

Now here is where the rubber meets the road. I need you to know that this future Christianity is really exciting to me. Being part of history being born, helping to help shape Christianity for the next 500 years is incredibly exciting. FOR ME.

Others are going to hate it. Some of you are going to hate it.

Some are going to resist; are going to go to that rummage sale, buy up all the stuff being sold and hold on to it for another generation or two.

And this is where our discernment process comes in. Part of our discernment must be whether we are willing to embrace these new ways of being church and move forward into the future God is setting before us. Or are we going to be a church that holds on to tradition and our past with all our might, digging in our heels and risking extinction because that is the way we have always done it?

I want to be the pastor of a church that is a part of this newfangled Christianity. I don't know what it will look like. I don't know how to do it. I don't know if we will even know when we get there. I suspect it will take a lot of prayer, a lot of conversation, a lot of faith, a lot of LOVE, and a lot of BEING STILL AND KNOWING GOD.

I want to be a pastor who explores that future. I love this church deeply and with all my heart. I want what is best for it. That is what I understand love to be, to want the best for the one you love. So I want to respect its tradition, its spirit and its faithfulness. And we need to be honest and up front with one another about what that faithfulness means moving into the future. If this congregation wants to hold on to the past and resist the future, then I hope you will be respectful and appreciative of my need to find a church that wants to move forward. And I will be respectful and appreciative of your need to find a pastor that will minister with you, among you and to you. This is not meant as a threat, as blackmail, as coercion, or in any mean spirit. It is said out of love and respect with as much honesty as I have.

If this congregation wants to step out into the future in faith, then I am ready, willing and very excited to begin a new ministry among you. I hope it is one where we recognize the rummage sale going on, enter into it and create the future together, with God. That would be really exciting. This church has the potential to once again be on the cutting edge of Christian history, making a difference and loving the world into being.

But you need to know that both of these options are difficult. We are a diverse congregation. And either way we are going to need to find ways to lovingly and respectfully invite some among us to find a spiritual home that speaks to their heart. That will mean inviting some to find a more traditional church. The good news is that there are plenty of them around. But it might also mean inviting some to find a church that is more open and progressive. Those invitations are also about love; about loving each other so much that someone else's spiritual health is a central concern.

My spiritual health is not dependent on being the pastor of a church that holds on to ideas, practices or theology because of fear or a desire to live in the past. It is dependent on being the pastor of a church that wants to be part of this future journey, to move into uncharted territory, knowing that God is with us. As a matter of fact, I heard recently that the name for God in Hebrew, Yahweh, can be translated "I will be what tomorrow demands." And I believe that is true. That God will be with us on our journey.

But whether or not to embrace the future church is, in my mind, the single most important question in our discernment process. It will affect everything else. Because the rummage sale has begun. The house is no longer as it was. Christianity is changing. The question is: Will we change with it, knowing God, the Lord of hosts, is with us? Knowing that love is the way? Change is inevitable, but progress is optional.

Amen.