

“Keep the Change”

Proverbs 29: 18;
Hebrews 13: 1-2;
John 4: 21-26

They say that change is the only constant thing. People also say that change happens slowly, if ever, in the church.

Actually, that is not necessarily true, and we can prove it. How many ladies are here today wearing hats and white gloves? But our grandmothers wore those things to church. Something must have changed.

Okay, here's another one. Raise your hand if you have on jeans, or tennis shoes. That's fine, but it is different from when I was a little kid.

Nowadays, how we dress for church is up to us—from dressed up to casual. The point is we are here, to worship God.

As time has gone by, churches have changed and included new things. This church has a lot of things which were not possible or usual fifty to one hundred years ago. We have air conditioning, worship screens, telephones, computers, sound systems. We have indoor plumbing.

So, we know that change is possible in the church.

Now, I'm going to switch to another aspect of church, but keep the idea of change in mind.

Last year, about this time I think, our District Superintendent, Rev. Yolanda Villa, asked us a very important question. She asked us why we have church. Now that is a very basic question, and she was instructing us as she asked it, because of course, she knew the answer herself.

The answer is—“To make disciples for Jesus Christ.” That is also the official mission of the United Methodist Church, collectively and as individual churches.

As I said, that was an instructive, teaching question, because at that point in time, it seemed like we were losing sight of the point: to make disciples for the Lord. This does involve worship, spiritual growth, and learning, and service to others, of course, but the main thing is making Christians.

Sad to say, we aren't alone in this mind-set. Somehow this happens in churches a lot, and it has for centuries.

There's a story/analogy I'd like to share with you. I may have told it before, and you will probably figure it out yourselves, anyway.

Once upon a time, there was a rocky, perilous bay on the coast. Ships and boats were always crashing and wrecking there; lives were often lost. The good people who lived near the bay decided to build a rescue station. They supplied it with boats and life-jackets, blankets and towels, even a place to make hot food and drinks for the rescued victims.

The rescue station was a great success! Many people were saved, and they were very grateful. Those who ran the rescue station were delighted, and decided to celebrate, and even improve the station.

The improvements included carpeting, and nice upholstered furniture. But that became a problem, because the people rescued from drowning were soaking wet, and the carpet and upholstered furniture got wet. Some of those in charge of the rescue station got quite perturbed. There began to be an undercurrent of grumpiness around the station.

However, so many people had been saved that they had to celebrate! They celebrated with a fine dinner, but they neglected to invite those who had been rescued. After all, the last time they had been there, they had gotten water all over the place!

Things went on in this way, and in time, the rescue station ceased to rescue anyone, and no longer served its function.

Now, you can see how this compares to churches, can't you? If a church focuses on making disciples for Jesus Christ, and Christian salvation, that is the proper function. If the people of the church get distracted and fall in love with their building or possessions or customs instead, then people outside of the church are not finding Jesus or the salvation he offers, at least not as a result of the church.

I suppose that is just human nature, because this does happen and not only in stories. It happened in the time of John Wesley, the man who founded the Methodist movement and church.

John Wesley lived in England during the 1700's. At that time and place, the Church of England was the church. In fact, Wesley was a priest in the Church of England, and he did not intend to start a new church at all.

What happened was that he saw a great many flaws in the Church of England, and he sought to mend them.

One big flaw was that the church, in many ways, was a church in name only. Often, very little was required of church members in terms of repentance and holy living, and the people hardly ever went to church!

Another big problem was that the Church of England was quite satisfied with life as it was in England. There was severe poverty, and child-labor, and it was believed that that was how God wanted it.

There was even that philosophy expressed in the hymn, “All Creatures Great and Small”:

“The rich man at his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.”

We don't sing that verse in America.

All that is to say that the Church of England was neglecting its duties to the poor, which, of course, was and is against Jesus' teachings. England considered itself a Christian country, but it was failing to be so.

The other problem which John Wesley encountered was the entrenched establishment of the Church of England, or what could be called a very bad case of respectability and pride. Church appointments were purchased by pastors who had finished their studies. Because of this, the pastors got very territorial and possessive. They also tended to favor their richest and most elite parishioners.

Enter John Wesley. Because God had called him to do so, he would preach anywhere, any time. He would start out as a guest preacher, at a pulpit in another church, and by the time he had proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, “the need for repentance and giving up unholy living,” he was asked not to return to that church. He ran out of churches that way. Sometimes he was even run out of town—there were riots—people threw things at him.

Yet, John Wesley had a strong, Christian message. He had great concern for the poor. When the hierarchy in the Church of England told him that he couldn't preach in a church where some other minister served, Wesley would preach in fields, and coal-mines, and marketplaces. When he was told that he could only preach on land he owned, he preached from his father's grave. John Wesley looked upon “the world as his parish.”

However, being a human being, this was hard on him. He said that he did not love field-preaching.

“I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, an handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal, if I do not trample all those underfoot, in order to save one more soul?”

In other word, comfort and preferences are nothing to the Christian salvation of one soul!

So, the Methodists didn't start out with big, fancy churches—it just kind of happened over time. And there is nothing wrong with having a good building to worship God—a place of beauty and reverence in honor of God. In fact, our own children are learning that from Fran Curry, as she teaches them to be acolytes, even if it was an uphill battle today.

The problem that so many of us have is that we get territorial about our church buildings. We get possessive of them—and even possessive of “how things are.” How the worship is conducted, which songs are sung, what kind of music—as if our church exists to please us, and us alone.

I have a friend, Mark, who is a Methodist minister in England. When someone in his church complains about an element of the worship service, he says, “Well, I guess it wasn't your week to be pleased.” He has a lot more nerve that I do, but God bless him!

Another problem we can get into is thinking that church is just for us, and “our kind of people.” That's not even logical! If we are truly Christian people, we want Christian salvation for everyone on this earth—no matter how they look, or dress, or speak. No matter how much money they have or don't have. No matter what!

So, from time to time, we are going to have to leave our comfort zones, and reach out to newcomers, visitors, neighbors, people in the community. We are going to have to invite people in, and make them welcome. This may actually involve change on our part.

But we know that change is possible—in our clothing, in our equipment—and most importantly in our hearts and lives.

The vision is that each person—young and old, near and far, will become a Christian. Each person will accept Jesus, as Lord and Savior, and will live a good Christian life. Some of us pray this every day for people we know, and people in our families. I do.

This is the vision—
and where there is no vision, the people perish.

Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)