

“ Ch-Ch-Changes”

Sermon – May 24, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

“The only constant in life is change.” So said the philosopher Heraclitus (hera-CLIE-tus) from the city of Ephesus about 500 years before today’s epistle was sent to the churches in that city.

We like things constant—and we like change. As a youth, you like change and growing up and looking toward the future. But even as a youth you like some things constant, like holiday traditions.

And, as an adult if you marry, you find those kind of “constants” change as you each bring your own traditions and ways of doing things.

Right now, things have been so constant the past two months with everyone mostly confined to their homes, that everyone is bursting for change, for something different.

I know some of you who are the cooks at home that long to be waited on and served at a restaurant. Others want to hug their grandchildren or travel to see relatives. And some would simply like to get a decent haircut.

But even as we start to open up, things will never be the same again—and that might make you a bit anxious.

Well, imagine how the disciples of Jesus felt. Six weeks ago they are coming into Jerusalem with Jesus in the flesh, having supper together, then—surprise! Jesus is crucified. Then three days later—surprise! He is risen. Then surprise! He’s back eating and talking with them. Then 40 days later—surprise! He is gone again.

As David Bowie said, “Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes, Turn and face the strange.” Strange indeed. And things did change for the disciples—and for us.

There is no return to the way things were before—no return to normalcy.

The world changed, because as the epistle lesson from Ephesians says

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of Christ, “[God has] seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.”

Jesus is Lord. Not Caesar, in the disciples’ time, nor any of the powers, pursuits, or promises that vie for control of our own lives.

In the accounts of the ascension in Acts and the empty tomb in Luke, we hear about two men in dazzling white robes, asking “Why are you looking for him?”

This link between them shows that ascension clarifies the resurrection.

Namely, to proclaim the resurrection is to claim that God has exalted him as Lord and Messiah

—the same Jesus who welcomed the sinners, who suffered and died in shame and rejection by this world.

Jesus is God’s promise and plan for the whole world, and neither death nor anything else is able to stop that.

That is good news, but what does that mean?

Even the disciples after the risen Jesus spends 40 days with them and

“opened their minds to understand the scriptures”, still ask in Acts,

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

While it is understandable why they ask, “restore” indicates a hope that is too small. What God has in mind is not just bringing Israel back to the “good ole’ days,” but bringing Israel to its yet-unrealized goal of being light to the whole world.

The disciples may have thought they were on the verge of inheriting an old-style kingdom, when in fact they are at the edge of God’s mission to

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redeem all nations, a mission that will consume the rest of their lives—and ours.

Jesus answers their question about restoring the kingdom, basically saying, “Hey, it’s not for you to know when these things might happen. Instead, you will receive power through the Holy Spirit and you will testify about me to people everywhere.”

Then Jesus leaves. And now it’s time to get to work.

Because neither the disciples nor us get to sit around and wait for God to do something. We don’t get to just say “I believe in Jesus” and wait for the Second Coming, looking forward to smugly watching all the sinners being sent to hell while we go to heaven.

Jesus said the disciples would receive power and be his witnesses. And indeed, the movement grew from a few dozen people to a worldwide church.

But as Osvaldo Vena, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, comments:

“What is the meaning and role of power in the Church today? How do we use it? Is it power over? Is it power to? Or is it power with? The three are different manifestations of power but while the first is oppressive, and the second paternalistic, only the third type is the power that comes from the Holy Spirit. It is the power to witness together: “power with,” a democratic, egalitarian kind of power, which makes the difference between an institution that is bent on self-preservation and one which understands its vocation as prophetic witness in society.”

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Being church means being inviting, not coercing; empathetic, not judgmental; giving, not taking.

And it means that we ourselves should grow in our faith and not assume we have all the answers.

In Ephesians 1, verse 17 from today’s lesson the author says, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him.”

This is not a platitude, but a real request that the church may grow in knowledge. This is not just take a confirmation class and you’re done; this is throughout our lives. The disciples’ knowledge did not stop growing in knowledge after the 40 days that the risen Christ was with them and teaching them. They continued to have revelations, such as that Christ was not just for the Jews, but for all people, and that religious practices were not as important as loving, accepting, and helping people.

So as things change and what it means to be church changes, let us see—and pray that others see—that these can be opportunities for expanding and deepening our faith in new revelatory ways.

To quote author and pastor, John C. Maxwell,

“Change is inevitable. Growth is optional.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.