

“What Now?”

Genesis 12:1-2, Luke 9:46-50

July 1, 2012

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church

Milford, Connecticut

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Who knew shoe-shopping could be so exciting?

I’m not talking about a sale at Bob’s or Macy’s; or the latest fashion at DSW on the Post Road. On a sultry Wednesday in the hills of south-central Pennsylvania 149 years ago this very morning, men were shoe shopping; or, more accurately, shoe appropriating. The Battle of Gettysburg in the American Civil War began when Confederate troops foraged for shoes in that small, farm crossroad town. They were met by Union troops, some of whom were Connecticut men, Milford men, commemorated on the monument across the street. Take a look at it if you haven’t, and remember, on these days preceding July 4th, the sacrifices that make us free.

What’s the point? Neither the northern nor the southern army ever intended to fight at Gettysburg. The largest battle ever fought in the Western Hemisphere came about by accident. Both armies thought the other miles away. As the bullets began to fly, one can imagine them thinking, “What now?”

So this morning’s message is entitled “What Now?” Thank goodness no bullets are flying. But the appointment of a new pastor is, to some degree, about the unexpected and about change. So I want to talk about change: why it’s tough, why it’s inevitable, and why it is God’s gift to us.

Change is tough. There is a part of me, and perhaps you—maybe even the biggest part—that resists change. The word *homeostasis*, from Greek words meaning “similar” and “standing still,” describes the phenomenon in organisms and institutions that resists change. In physics, the first of Sir Isaac Newton’s three laws of motion tells us *“Every object continues in its state of rest,*

or of uniform motion in a straight line, unless compelled to change that state by external forces acted upon it.” Or, as colloquially stated, “a body at rest remains at rest; a body in motion remains in motion.” Connecticut natives well-know we are “The Land of Steady Habits.” But probably most importantly for us: “Do you know how many United Methodists it takes to change a light bulb? CHANGE?!?!?”

Carol, my wife of eight days, said to me the other morning, “*You know, when you proposed I never imagined I’d be a pastor’s wife.*” Me, neither. When I proposed a year ago I was happy in my ministry as chief executive of The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport, where I had been since 2006. My work was effective and I fully expected I would finish my ministry there.

The problem was that God had other ideas. God kept whispering. God kept saying, as God did to Abram long ago in today’s reading “*Go to the land I will show you.*” “*What now?*” I thought. I had no idea where “*the land I will show you*” was. But I knew, increasingly, that I was missing preaching to a regular congregation, teaching the adults and children, living the vitality of parish life. So I listened as best I was able. Even then, I did not express my interest concerning Mary Taylor Memorial right away when Rev. Carle first shared with colleagues that a pastoral change was announced. For me, the change of a return to the parish would mean reduced compensation; a home relocation; a house sale; and change and impact for my family-to-be. But there is that scripture again: *go to the land I will show you...so that you will be a blessing.*” Wow. WOW: to be a blessing, in God’s name, to others! What could be a more sacred privilege? So I raised my hand, and here I am.

For some that is happy news; for others, sad news; and for most: “*Well, let’s wait and see.*” No value judgment is intended in that, but simply an honest note about the reality of change. A friend of mine once said “*Change equals loss.*” It is true, I find.

Even good change has elements of loss. And that is okay. To accept it may be tough, but it is the way to a new beginning.

Change is also inevitable: Never mind the French epigram quoted by Alphonse Karr "[plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose](#)"—"The more things change, the more they remain the same." Change is real. Pastors leave. Loved ones die. Jobs are lost. At the risk of, as the old-timers called it, "bleeding on the pulpit," allow me to share that my 87 year old mother fell this past Tuesday and will soon have surgery to repair her broken hip. It has not been a good week for Yvonne and Milfred Bodt. I ask your prayers for them.

Yet, other kinds of change are equally real. Pastors come. Babies are born. Marriages begin. Graduations are completed. Careers are launched. 80th birthdays are celebrated. These are also changes. Change is not always bad, is it? In a church with such visible and tangible support of Twelve-Step programs, we remember Reinhold Neibuhr's *Serenity Prayer*:

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the
difference.*

There is a certain peace that comes with accepting this inevitability and the highs and lows it brings our lives. Within Rudyard Kipling's poem "If" is my favorite couplet:

*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;*

If we can do that, asserts Kipling, we will have grown to full and mature personhood: a pretty good thing to aim for as a follower of Christ.

So change is tough and change is inevitable. And change is also a gift from God! Change is also a gift from God! Consider the scriptures:

“Behold, I make all things new.”
“I saw a new heaven and a new earth.”
“I am doing a new thing; do you not perceive it?”

Today’s Gospel reading tells how Jesus seeks change by challenging the disciples’ understanding of power. In the first instance, they are arguing amongst themselves about who deserves power and prestige. Jesus inverts the power pyramid and declares the least among them is the greatest. In the second instance the disciple John, speaking on behalf of the disciples—he uses the pronoun “we”—draws a narrow definition of loyalty by trying to stop someone doing good who didn’t follow “them.” Jesus throws the circle wide: “Don’t stop him. If he is not against you he is for you.” In these two instances, Jesus’ words of change are a gift from God. Power is Godly power and consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus when it is found in solidarity with the weak—the children, in this instance—and when it is power exerted by, and on behalf of, those who are “on the margins” and “on the fence.” It is a gift because it reminds us of God’s advocacy for each one of us when those times come—as they surely will—when we are weak and we are on the margins. What a gift to know that the God who is Ancient of Days, and Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever; is also the same God who invites each of us to change; to confess our sin; to turn around from old ways toward new possibilities; and who promises, quite simply, that if we do not like the life we have, we may have another!

What now? Open ourselves to God: who has blessed us to be a blessing and invites us to follow in faith; who is welcomed when we welcome the least among us; and whose son Jesus is glorified by those who self-consciously take his name and those who aren’t quite there but are open to the possibility. In this way, “What now?” becomes “What now!” I can’t wait to see what God will do with us, together! Can you? Amen.