

The Challenge of Choosing Change

Luke 10:25-37

January 26, 2020

Rev. Dr. Marcia Bailey, preaching

How many of you made New Years' resolutions? Can I ask how many of you have already broken them?! Some studies show that by Feb, more than one third of the people who make annual resolutions have given up on them. Other studies show that 80% of people fail to make the changes they say they want to make! And others say it's worse than that: that only 8% of people actually turn their resolution into a new habit. That's *not* a very good outcome.

Yet, year after year we *talk* about how we are going to change. The most popular resolutions? You might guess them: lose weight, exercise more, save money. All great things to work towards but it seems we can't seem to do what it takes to achieve the goals we say we want to strive for. What's up with that? Why is change so difficult?

There's lots of reasons change is hard, even *when* we seek it; it's even harder when change is thrust upon us. Fear makes change difficult; we don't always know what's around that next bend, what the consequences are for our choices, what we might actually be getting ourselves into. Loss of routine and the familiar is another reason change is hard, along with lack of support, unclear vision, no actual strategy for goal achievement, unrealistic expectations, and unpredictability. These are just *some* of the reasons we experience change as challenging. But there are even more, as demonstrated in the text we read this morning, which happens to also be the same text we worked with last Sunday. Your conversations last week about it raised even more reasons why change is difficult.

Last week we worked in small groups, imagining ourselves to be one of the characters in the parable: the Priest, the Levite or the Samaritan. From the position of one of these people, I asked

you to think about why they responded to the person on the side of the road as they did. In the case of the Priest and Levite, why they *didn't* stop to help. In the case of the Samaritan, why they *did*.

Initially I reminded you of some of the barriers that the story suggests were already in place: different social classes and roles, different religious understandings, different traditions and practices. Wealth may have played into this, along with each one's particular sense of self-importance. All of this is evident on the surface of the story, but you found more when you dove in deeper.

Let me remind you of what you said! Those of you imagining you were the **priest** identified your lack of experience in helping the wounded as one reason you didn't stop; you didn't feel qualified to attend to this person's needs, you could do more harm than good! So, you didn't change your course of behavior, you just went on by. Busyness was another reason; there's already too much on the plate. Doing something new requires time and energy you didn't possess. You *did* suggest that maybe you could get someone else to come back and help; that is, maybe you can get *others* to change just as long as you didn't have to yourself. You already had important (confidential!) things to keep you occupied; you had no time for change.

Our friend the **Levite** had additional reasons why doing something different, outside our comfort zones perhaps, is challenging. You said that you were fearful; the danger that had befallen the person on the side of the road could happen to you as well! Fear is a powerful influencer when it comes to thinking about change. As Levites you honestly identified the class difference between you and the one in need; there was no relationship between "your kind" and this one so there was no sense of shared humanity or kinship that might have made you think it was important for you to be involved. And finally, you admitted to complacency; change is

messy. Getting involved leads to unexpected things. It's simpler to keep doing what you're doing, not to get into the middle of someone else's business. You never know where *that* will take you!

And then finally, some of you considered what it would be like to be the **Samaritan**, the one who *did* stop, who went out of their way, who spared no expense and got involved in the life of a stranger, all because they were lying helpless and hurt on the side of the road. Perhaps it was pity, you wondered (which is what the text actually says). "Psychology Today" suggests that "the attitude of most people toward beggars or the homeless is a typical example of pity. ...Compassion involves the willingness to become personally involved, while pity usually does not. Pity is more spectator-like than compassion; we can pity people while maintaining a safe emotional distance from them. While pity involves the belief in the inferiority of the object, compassion assumes equality in a common humanity.¹ Hmm...so maybe pity isn't such a good thing....

You Samaritans, if I may call you so, were also honest enough to suggest that you might have just done it out of pride; "see how good I am, to give one-time help to someone in need." You know, cross that off your "do good" list for the week or month, or even year! Another suggestion was that the Samaritan changed course because of spite, recognizing this person was not of the same "tribe" as the helper, but in no position to refuse. But lest we be all negative, you also said that the Samaritan may have stopped because they realized that regardless of who this person appeared to be, they were a human being in need; knowing that all of us need help sometime, it was worth the risk to stop and render aid, to be the one who "did good."

What kind of change are we being called to embrace in this season of our lives together? While we have experienced a number of relatively small changes together over the last year, I

wonder what bigger, deeper, more transformative change God has in store for us?! What are the things that keep us from entering into change with expectation and excitement? Why does change seem ominous and not opportunistic? If we are to become who and what God envision us to be on this corner, in this community, then we need to *embrace* the challenge of change! We need more than a cosmetic make over here; it's time to begin again!

In fact, in many ways that's just the change we are poised to accept—to begin anew. When people ask me about First Baptist, I sometimes describe what we are experiencing and trying to be about as a “church restart”. We get to envision and dream and build and create God's expression of justice and community and inclusion from the ground up! And we need to view that as a positive, life-giving thing! We are in a position to shed what doesn't work anymore, to let go of what we don't need anymore, to celebrate and move on from what doesn't serve us or our neighborhood anymore! This is a season of liberation! Of possibility! Of new life!

Rather than bemoan what isn't, let's seize this opportunity to do something radically different and become new! Let's listen for and respond to God's invitation to try new things, to move out beyond these walls to engage new people, to become something and someone's who are relevant and open and receptive to what is already there, waiting, perhaps, for us! Did you notice that the word “change” is actually a part of the word “challenge”? Yes, change is hard! Yes, change is disorientating. Yes, change is messy. But it's also life-giving and energizing. We who dare to proclaim the good news to the oppressed in our own community, need to remember that the Gospel is all about change. Our foundational understanding is that thru the power and presence of God in Jesus, we can become new!

There are people lying in the ditches of our society all around us, marginalized because of poverty, because of race, because of sexual orientation, gender, age, expression of faith. They

don't need more people to "cross by on the other side", least of all those of us who say we represent a liberating faith! They need people who are willing to face the fear of change and change anyway. They need people who are willing to risk the danger that change can present and change anyway. They need people who are willing to recognize their needs, put them on our own backs, accompany them to the resources we can afford to pay for, care for them until they can get back on their own feet, rightfully empowered to engage life again. The *challenge* of change isn't them; *it's us* and all the fears and excuses we give in order to avoid it.

The lawyer in the parable *knew* what he needed to do: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus confirms it: "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

ⁱ (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-the-name-love/201008/do-not-pity-me>)