

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

September 30, 2018

Nineteenth Sunday
after Pentecost

John 12:23-27

Second in a four-part series on Change

Experiencing Change: Experiencing Loss

This summer one of you suggested that I preach on the topic of CHANGE – and, in particular, what it means for a church to make changes.

Last week we began with *Encountering Change - What can we Learn?*

Next week we'll look at *Engaging Change - Making Decisions*

And after that *Embracing Change - What does this Mean for us?*

But today we need to acknowledge that when we experience change, even for the good, we're also experiencing loss.

In our reading from the Gospel of John (12:3-27), Jesus is less than a week away from his own death and is trying to prepare his friends for what this will mean for them and for the world.

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.

I read the following in a magazine this week - in the "Miss Manners" section:

It seems that waiters these days tend to younger folk at the table first and take the matriarch's order last. Maybe I'm living by a bygone standard, but it bugs me every time. Is it outdated to expect the matriarch to order first?

*So many etiquette traditions were about putting women on a pedestal - and not in a good way, because if you're like a treasured sculpture, then you're more of an object than an agent. Hence the old traditions of women getting menus without prices and men ordering and paying for women, who were assumed not to earn or have money. In other words, there's a fine line between chivalry and chauvinism. That doesn't mean you can't grieve the loss of a tradition. But the expectation for the oldest woman to order first might be outdated. (Catherine Newman, *Real Simple*, October 2018)*

The world around us is changing - in big ways and small ways - for the better and for the worse.

I think of technological improvements, like in cars. I love the backup camera, but I remember when power windows first became a thing, and if something went wrong with it, you couldn't get your window up/down. Not helpful!

I also think of parenting these days - how we now understand child development and can have realistic expectations for the different stages our kids go through, rather than viewing children as miniature adults.

Or think of voting rights. It's wild to think that women have been able to vote in our country for less than 100 years (since 1920); or that people of color only got the right to vote in 1965!

And then there's social media, while we can keep up with all sorts of people quite easily, we also now don't interact face-to-face, or even by phone as much.

When we experience change - we experience loss.

When I was 25, I moved from Washington state, where I'd lived for two years, back to the midwest. In those short two years, I'd made good friends and had excellent adventures in a stunningly beautiful part of the country. And while I was looking forward to returning to Minneapolis, it was hard to leave. It was a teary goodbye at the airport as my friends all came to see me off at some crazy early time. I alternately cried and slept as I flew to Wisconsin to visit my parents before heading up to the apartment waiting for me in Mpls. When I got off the plane my mom met me at the gate, and asked if I'd been crying. And I told her I was so sad to be leaving Washington. She said, "But you wanted to leave." "Yes, but it's still HARD."

Even changes that we choose, that are good for us, can be sad and hard. But even with the sadness, we can still experience a transformation.

When Jesus says, *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit* (John 12:24), he is saying that transformation comes through loss. The fruitfulness of giving up power or privilege so that something much greater than any individual can be birthed is central to what we believe.

The truth is that, when we can know and name the loss, we can more fully experience the fruitfulness of transformation rather than bemoaning what is changing.

And more often than not this will be a process, a gradual discovery rather than a sudden aha. Our life is one of growth. The transformation we experience as Christians is how God is shaping our lives to mirror Jesus, and it takes time - it's a process.

Matt Haimovitz is a virtuoso cellist, and he's had the same cello for 30 years. And not just any cello, a 17th century, multi-million-dollar cello, which he named Matteo after its creator. And which he accidentally broke when he tripped with it in his hand a couple years ago. He sent it to be repaired and it took 15 months! Then he went to pick it up. Anna Russell writes about his reunion with his cello in the New Yorker:

At the repair shop, Haimovitz rang the doorbell and gave his shoulders a little shake. "Oh, I'm nervous!" he said. Inside, a small group was gathered around glasses of prosecco. His wife looked on anxiously. Matteo was on a stand near the center of the room. "Oh, it's gorgeous, you guys—wow," Haimovitz said. He plucked a few strings.

He sat down and played a few hoarse scales, before launching into a jaunty tune, the prelude to Bach's Cello Suite No. 1. He ended on a long note, and then sat in silence. "Hmm," he said.

"You need to play it a little bit more," Matano coaxed.

Haimovitz played for a few more minutes, then stopped.

His wife, tentatively: "Is it possible that in its new iteration it wants a different kind of bow?"

A new bow was brought, and he played again. He leaned in, listening. "Yeah," he said. He played a mournful tune, Philip Glass's "Overture," and came up smiling: "Very cool!" Everyone applauded.

Afterward, Haimovitz was more circumspect. While playing, he said, he couldn't help thinking about the old Matteo. "There were moments where it was, like, I'm missing certain things, where's that?" But then something changed. "Gradually, the vibration felt the same." He accepted a glass of prosecco. "It's a process," he said.

(Anna Russell, Reunion, New Yorker, Sept. 17, 2018)

Paul wrote to some of the early Christians, *I am sure of this, that He who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus* (Philippians 1:6). God is starting and completing the work of transformation in us.

God doesn't force anyone to change, but he calls us to change. He says things like, "Be holy as I am holy," and it sounds like an impossible task. But its possibility comes by the work of God. This transformation / experience grows us into the people God created us to be.

Paul put it this way: (our lesson from last week)

The truth is in Jesus: you took off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires; you are being renewed in the spirit of your minds; you put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth (Ephesians 4:20-24).

We are called to put off the "old self" and take hold of the "new self," as individuals and as a church. But still...we all know that letting go of the familiar is difficult, even when the new that is offered is better. For some reason, it seems part of our psyche to resist change, even when it will help. Here are just some of the reasons that I think change is difficult:

People are stubborn - we want our own way

People feel trapped - the risk is too great

People are comfortable - we like knowing what's going on around us

We are afraid of the unknown - it's unsettling not knowing what's next

When we experience change, we experience loss, and it can be hard.

Christine Caine writes about this:

When I injured my knee in a skiing accident a few years ago, the doctor told me that I could recover fully or partially, quickly or slowly. It was entirely up to me. The degree to which I was willing to endure the pain of recovery was the degree to which my knee would heal.

I think that same principle applies to most areas of our lives. **The degree to which we are willing to endure discomfort is the degree to which we will find healing, experience success, and fulfill the purpose God has for us.**

Oftentimes **we focus so much on the hard things we *have to* do that we lose sight of what we *want to* experience** on the other side of the discomfort. As a result, we stop short of realizing our full potential.

One of the best habits you can cultivate is to shift your perspective on enduring the discomfort of change and growth by replacing one phrase. **If you replace the phrase "have to" with the phrase "want to," you will experience less resistance and greater breakthrough.**

Instead of "I have to exercise."

Say, **"I want to be healthy in all areas of my life."**

Instead of "I have to make a budget."

Say, **"I want to be equipped to live generously."**

Instead of "I have to cook dinner...again."

Say, **"I want to serve those I love well."**

Instead of "I have to make a hard decision."

Say, **"I want to develop my courage and wisdom."**

Instead of "I have to study."

Say, **"I want to be a good steward of the skills God has given me."**

Embracing discomfort is never easy, but a **change of perspective going in can help you develop the grit you need to push through.**

Remember God's promise in James 1:12 - *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*

There is purpose in the hard things!

There is purpose in change! When we experience change, we experience loss. But when we can know and name the loss, we can more fully experience the fruitfulness of transformation rather than bemoaning what is changing.

Because the Christian life is about CHANGE!!!! It's about training ourselves to be people who are not just comfortable with change, but who are ourselves agents of change.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Amen.