

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

September 23, 2018

Eighteenth Sunday  
after Pentecost

Ephesians 4:20-24

Mark 2:23-27

Romans 12:2

First in a Series of Four Sermons on Change

## ***Encountering Change: What Are We Learning?***

Ephesians 4:20-24

*That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Mark 2: 23-27

*One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."*

Romans 12:2

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

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. And so we'll spend today and the next three Sundays looking at different aspects of change in general, and in the church in particular.

Next week: *Experiencing Change - Looking at Loss*

After that: *Engaging Change - Making Decisions*

Lastly: *Embracing Change - What does this Mean for us?*

But today we begin with *Encountering Change - What can we Learn?*

The first thing to point out is that, when we're uncomfortable with something that's changing, most often, it's not about the thing that's changing.... the hallway, the fair, the way we do something in worship... but something deeper, in us.

As we encounter changes in our lives – and here at church – they are first opportunities to learn. Here at church we have a word for it – disciple. To be a Christian – to follow Christ – is to always be learning. And the kind of learning I mean is not a continuing education course taken at the local library, but rather a self-reflective growing in maturity – growing in faith.

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.

But the change that we're engaged in is not like a cherry tree trying to change itself into an orange tree. It's about a cherry tree trying to grow up into what it is meant to be—a cherry tree. As Christians, we are not trying to become something we're not. We are becoming who God created us to be. The Bible calls this "becoming new creations," and is something that happens repeatedly in our lives. It's living out in real time what has been secured for all time.

As Paul said about the church in Ephesus, *be made new in the attitude of your minds; and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Being a disciple means deliberately identifying ourselves with God's interests in other people. A true expression of Christian character is not in simply doing good deeds, but in having our minds and our attitudes in line with God as well. When the Spirit of God transforms us, we exhibit divine/Godly characteristics in our life, not just good human characteristics. God's life in us expresses itself as God's life, not as human life trying to be godly.

And we are changed when, by the grace of God, the God's ways becomes natural for us. And this becomes evident in the practical, everyday details of life, not in times of intimate private Holy Spirit moments with God. And then when we encounter new and different things that make us uncomfortable, we find them not so uncomfortable. (Oswald Chambers, from *My Utmost for His Highest Updated*)

A colleague of mine had gone clothes shopping for her son / toddler. She explained to her husband that some of the stuff was daycare appropriate and some of it was specifically for church. A few days later, Bruce told her he could not find a pair of shorts for their son to wear to daycare, that the only clothes left in the bag of new clothes were church clothes. So she went to look and found a pair of shorts that could have gone either way – they were khaki, but they had an elastic waist and tie instead of a button and zipper.

So she came out of their son's room and told him, "You know what, you can wear these to daycare. You shouldn't wear pants with an elastic waist to church anyway, because those are comfy clothes and you should always be a little bit uncomfortable at church."

She's right. As much as the church is a safe place where we can all come and worship God and connect to each other in a way that makes us feel secure and protected, I think it should also be a place where, at times, we find ourselves feeling a little bit uncomfortable.

To be clear, I am not talking about being uncomfortable in an inappropriate way; but in the sense that here at church God is always stretching us and calling us to be who He intended us to be.

In our reading from the Gospel of Mark, we encounter Jesus getting into trouble, because he was doing things differently. It is the Sabbath and it is Jewish custom that from sunset on Friday through Saturday, no work is to be done. And yet, the disciples are plucking up heads of grain.

The Pharisees - religious officials - objected to Jesus, saying:

*Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?*

But Jesus did not respond to this objection by slapping the disciples' wrists and making them stop. And he did not say to the Pharisees, "Oh shoot, you know what, I totally lost track of the days, don't worry, this will never happen again!"

No; first of all, Jesus schooled the Pharisees in their own scriptures. He said basically, "Come on, guys, don't you remember what happened to David?"

Here is what Jesus was talking about: King David – who you may remember slayed Goliath when he was a young boy with a couple of stones and a slingshot – entered a temple as an adult and asked the priest if he could have some bread for his army. The priest said all he had was the Bread of the Presence, meaning holy bread, and that the men could only have it if they were considered clean and pure. So David said they were, the priest gave him the bread, and David went on his way.

Now – were the men actually clean and pure? Probably not.

But they were hungry. And David found them something to eat.

Jesus talked about David because he was trying to point out that sometimes what someone needs is more important than holding onto a tradition; that sometimes God is calling us to do a new thing, and that we should not cling so tightly to our own customs so that we miss what God is doing in our midst today.

But then Jesus took it one step further. What comes next that we didn't read is that then Jesus, himself, violated those same Sabbath laws when he walked into a synagogue and cured a man with a paralyzed hand. (Mark 3:1-5)

Do you think that made the Pharisees a little bit uncomfortable? I think so. This passage ends by saying: *The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against [Jesus], how to destroy him.* (Mark 3:6)

People do not like to be uncomfortable. We like to know what is coming next. We like our traditions to be predictable and our spaces to look or feel a certain way.

We do this in the church all the time. We worship a certain way, we set up our sanctuary a certain way and we do not want those things to change. We have the same events, year after year. We have traditions that we hold fast to. We often do not want to try something new because sometimes it is hard to picture something that we have never done before. Many of us are accustomed to the way we do church here and we cannot imagine it any other way.

But guess what? Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. He broke tradition; he did something that had never been done before, something that made the Pharisees uncomfortable.

And in the end, a man was healed. Shouldn't that have been the goal all along?

My point is this: It is okay to be a little bit uncomfortable sometimes. It is okay to try something new. It is okay to do something that has never been done before, even if that means stepping onto a path that has never been traveled on. It is okay to walk away, even if it is just for a moment, from the rituals and traditions that we do by rote and see what else God is calling us to do in this moment.

Sometimes being the church means being comfortably uncomfortable. It means not immediately dismissing something just because it is different and actively listening to new ideas. It means healing someone on the Sabbath because they are sick and serving someone holy bread because they are hungry. It means listening to God's still speaking voice guiding us along a journey that is filled with a grace and love that will exceed even our wildest imaginations.

God might be interrupting our lives to break us out of what's comfortable, inviting us into a deeper walk of faith. Because when things are changing around us, we are forced to rely on Him who is unchanging. When the proverbial rug gets ripped out from under us, we discover upon Whom we are really standing!

And in these moments invite God into your thinking.

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.  
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*  
(Romans 12:2)

When we encounter change, it's an opportunity to learn - about ourselves, about each other, and mostly about God and His desires for us as individuals and as a church. Who knows, the new thing may be from God's very heart.

So do not be afraid to be comfortably uncomfortable. Push your boundaries. Stretch yourself. Try something new. And be amazed at God's potential within our church.

And we may find that, along the way, people will be healed, people will be fed, and lives will be changed.

Amen.