

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

October 14, 2018

Twenty-First Sunday
after Pentecost

Mark 1:14-20
Romans 12:2

Fourth in a four-part series on Change

Embracing Change: What's Next For Us?

Sometime within the last year, I mentioned in a sermon a church in Wisconsin where we go every summer to visit my mom. It's out in "lake country" outside Milwaukee, and even though there are subdivisions and strip malls popping up all over the place, we still drive past corn and alfalfa fields.

Well, for the past 30 years or so there has been a sign on County Rd. P, at the edge of a corn field that reads *Future Home of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church*. Through the years it'd get worn and faded, there were a couple years when it was gone, but then the next year it'd reappear having been painted over again.... *Future Home of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church*.

Through the years I have wondered - and what I wondered with you in the sermon - what the backstory is of this hoped-for church, and how long would it be before they built it - if ever! I wonder if they feel like Moses - a people who have a clear vision and understanding of what God wants, and at the same time something equivalent to Moses' forty years in the wilderness...following God's call and then wandering for a long time.

And it's similar for those who follow Christ, when Christ calls us to follow him - this means moving, often leaving something (or someone) behind, and heading in a new direction.

It is hard work to get in step with God and to keep pace with Him—it means getting our second wind spiritually. In learning to walk with God, it's difficult to get in stride with Him, but once we have, then we are living into the reality of our little verse from Romans: *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.*

But still, as we are walking with Him we will find that His pace will always surpass us. He has different ways of doing things, and we have to be trained and disciplined in His ways. ... But when we are following Christ, learning from him, we begin seeing things the way he does, and then things begin to be possible which before were impossible.

It may take a long time to get there, but we have to keep at it. We can't walk away because it gets difficult, because we can't quite see the exact next step. Because as we continue in stride with God before long we will find that we have realigned our life together to what He wants for us, His purpose for us. (Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest Updated Edition*)

And as I said, when Christ calls us to follow him - it means moving, often leaving something (or someone) behind, and heading in a new direction.

How about us? What's next for us - that's in line with God's will - what Jesus wants for HIS church... ?

One thing "that's next" is something we decided to do last June. The Backpack Program. We adopted what *Loaves & Fishes* - the food pantry in Devens - had been doing; and going forward this will be one of the ways we "Live our Faith Beyond Our Walls." In late August we coordinated the giving away of 250 backpacks to children in the area.

And the way we discerned that this was the right next thing for us was pretty straightforward, uncomplicated, and clear.

So what else is next for us? A group of 7 of us (Bernard, Cheryl, Bonnie, Tom, Carl, Bonnie B) are meeting to explore how we might be more creative in worship, how might we do things differently here and there, to deepen our engagement with our Lord as we turn our hearts and minds toward Him during this hour.

We're learning - I might share some information about the history of worship, its roots in scripture and how tradition has shaped what we do.

We learn from each other - from those who have a long history here and those who know about other traditions.

We talk about loss - things we've let go of the past that we miss - things we might let go of now...wondering who will or won't miss things we might decide NOT to do.

We return to our primary purpose as a church and in worship as we consider what it would mean to do a new thing or stop doing a current thing... Does this bring us closer to God? Is this a barrier between us and God?

For example, we've decided to experiment with not saying the little litany after the offering: We shall not offer God....That which costs us nothing. Some of us find those words meaningful; some of us find them to be a barrier to worshipping God. And so we'll stop saying them for a while, and pay attention to how that impacts our worship.

Watch for other things we'll be experimenting with in worship!

So what else is next for us?

Because as Christ calls us to follow him - it means moving, often leaving something (or someone) behind, and heading in a new direction.

After worship we'll take another look at the Master Plan we developed over the past couple years, as we have considered what it would take to make our church fully accessible. Back in January we discerned that the plan in full was too much for us at this time. But just because we couldn't pursue that plan, doesn't mean that God doesn't want us to be accessible. And so the conversations have continued, and will continue after church today.

The reality is that "We can't choose whether change will come or not. But we can choose whether to embrace it or resist it." And it is critical to choose the kind of change that advances the work of God in us personally, as a church, and in the world for the sake of His kingdom.

"The alternative is to pick a rut and make it deeper." The truth is that God wants us to change - as individuals and as a church. The transformation is there for the choosing. Of course, so is the rut of remaining static. (Thom Rainer and Ed Stetzer, *Transformational Church*)

So what's next for us?

Following Christ / Walking with God - that's what's next for us. What does that look like? Let's seek to answer that question after church.

And this summer when we were in Wisconsin - we drove past that old corn field with the sign in it.... And guess what was there? St. Matthew's Lutheran Church had finally built...a school, pre-K through 8th grade. And I admit that every time I drove past it, I was a little jealous - and very hopeful.

Amen.