

## THE THREAT OF CHANGE

Acts 2: 1-18; Acts 8: 26-39

Change... What changes have you seen in your life? What changes have you had to live in your life? Change is inevitable. We all know that. But just because it's inevitable does it mean it's good? Does all change lead to better things? Or is some change bad? How do we measure change that is good from change that is bad? And if change is inevitable, are there some things and some values that remain the same despite the change?

These are big questions. They're big questions for us personally and they're big questions when we think about our society and world. They are also big questions confronting our church. In a few weeks, our church, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, will be debating once again where we stand when it comes to those within our churches and our world who identify as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, intersex and more. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to such folk who are also some of us, our family, our neighbours, friends, elders and members in our churches, as: "queer."

Currently, our church's doctrine is based on the traditional view, believed to be biblical, which declares that when God created humanity, God made us either male or female and God gave us the gift of sexuality to be expressed exclusively between a man and a woman. The reason for this is that only sexual relations between a man and a woman can produce children and producing children and raising them within families where there is a mother and father is what we're made for as human beings. That's our church's current faith, officially.

This doctrine of marriage, moreover, is not only a biblical norm for society, it is believed, but an exclusive norm for society. Anything outside of heterosexual sexuality and clearly defined male and female gender identities are believed to be sinful. According to this view, sin places us not only against God and against truth and justice. Living in a state of sin without the search for forgiveness and a return to biblical norms will imperil our eternal destiny. There's no compromise or half-way point between heaven and hell. Unrepentant sin places us on the hell side. It is the church's responsibility, therefore, not only to defend the right way to live out our sexuality and our gender identity, but to try to persuade all people to embrace biblical norms for their identities and lifestyles. The church must love the sinner enough to hate their sin with the hope that the sin is removed and the soul healed. This is the traditional view.

OK, but what if there are many in the church who read the bible and have a faith that is different than this traditional faith? Certainly we here at Armour Heights church have been very clear that being queer is not a choice but the way you are made by God. And if God made you that way, you are loved and treasured as much as anyone else. Sin has nothing to do with how you are born but about the choices you make in life that are harmful and hurtful to others and to yourself. Expressing yourself in loving ways, being faithful to your spouse, respecting and cherishing them as a child of God like yourself has nothing to do with the gender you are attracted to or the gender you identify as.

And so, we at Armour Heights church are at odds with the official doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. But we are not alone. In fact, more and more Presbyterians are coming to change in their faith following us. And this is a threat to the traditionalists because they are against change. They believe the PCC is going down a path of sin and corruption if we give up the traditional faith and the traditional interpretation of the bible.

So who's right? Whose interpretation of the bible is right? Where is the Holy Spirit leading us in this time? Is the change that is coming from the Holy Spirit or is the change that is coming against the Holy Spirit?

Well, the earliest Christians were also accused of disrespecting and disregarding tradition. The apostles Peter and Paul were accused of being radicals and of breaking with the traditional understanding of scripture and biblical law. Paul's response in his letters is to make a distinction between the spirit and the letter of scripture. You can always find a verse or passage to back up your point of view. But what about the spirit behind the words? What about the larger story the bible is telling? Isn't this larger story the story of the Holy Spirit opening up new doors, new relationships and new pathways for God to work in human hearts and build God's kingdom fellowship? It is!

And this is exactly the story we're given at Pentecost and what follows Pentecost. And so, let us look more closely at scripture, not just the letter but the Spirit speaking in and through the scripture.

What is it that happens at Pentecost? Traditionally in the church, we call Pentecost the birth of the church through the Holy Spirit. Now by birth we do not mean faithful people were not inspired by the Holy Spirit before Pentecost. What we mean is that something significant and epic is begun at Pentecost. The church is officially born, and it is given a bold mandate and mission. What mandate and mission? Well if we simply focus on the

letter of scripture, as many Pentecostals and fundamentalists do, we understand the Holy Spirit as giving the gift of tongues and giving the early Christians boldness to go out and evangelize the world. But what is the deeper spirit behind the letter?

Think about it. We are given a long list of all the people gathered around the first Christians when the Holy Spirit falls on them. And what is it about these people that is emphasized? It's the diversity of cultures and languages spoken. Language and culture are reasons we are divided as human beings. Differences become a basis of mistrust and even conflict. Think about Israel and Palestine right now. The first thing the Holy Spirit does in and through the first Christians is speak the language of all peoples gathered, people having travelled to Jerusalem to worship at the temple during the great festival of Passover. Even as they are all there for the same reason, their differences of language and culture are reasons for division. What the Holy Spirit does is build a bridge by communicating the same message of inclusive love, but in all the different languages of the peoples gathered. The message here is very clear. God is the God of all people not just some people. God is a God of Jews and Palestinians, those living in and around Judea but also those who live elsewhere in the world too.

And that's only the beginning. The apostle Peter inspired by what he is experiencing within him and witnessing around him speaks to the people. He tells them that this is exactly what biblical prophecy proclaimed would happen when God's Spirit was poured out. He then quotes from the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh (not some flesh but all flesh), and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit..."

Traditionally, men alone would have the authority to prophesy, and free men, never slaves. And only old people have visions as young people can only dream dreams, hoping something will come of them. But now, every door is open, and every revelation and connection with God the Spirit is accessible to everyone. Differences are not barriers, and inclusion and bridge-building, communion and community are signs of the Spirit's flowering.

Okay, so language and culture, slave and free, men and women... does it end there? Absolutely not. Eventually, Peter inspired by the Spirit and witnessing the Spirit's presence will also welcome a Roman officer and his family, meaning not only non-Jewish gentiles are welcome, but the most hated race of all – the Romans who oppress them! Now they've got the Spirit too! But there's even more.

Our second reading from Acts depicts the flowering of the Spirit breaking down another traditional barrier to accessing God's love – those who would identify as queer in that world. How do we know it's the Spirit of God? Because we're told that an early Christian named Philip, and not even an apostle like Peter and Paul but a mere deacon, is led by the Spirit to encounter a person who is identified as a Eunuch. A Eunuch is someone who is neither male or female in any traditional sense, and we know nothing about their sexuality. But does that matter to Philip? Absolutely not! What matters is what the Spirit is awakening in the Eunuch and in Philip.

The passage the Eunuch happens to be reading is a traditional prophecy early Christians identified with Jesus: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him." Clearly, the fact that this passage is quoted like this is telling us, the readers, something important. Given what the Eunuch may have suffered socially in terms of public humiliation, having to be silent in order to survive and succeed, being treated as flawed in some way, even in the temple where he has come to worship, there is Jesus who is God's true messiah, who totally stands with him and identifies with him, silenced, humiliated and unjustly treated.

The good news Philip declares to the Eunuch is not just that this prophecy is all about Jesus. No. If Jesus is truly the Messiah, God's voice and embodied presence on earth, then it means that God on the cross stands with the Eunuch and with all those humiliated and crucified by the traditional norms of society... that the Eunuch, like all peoples, is not only welcomed in the love of God, but is fully a child of God forgiven and invited into wholeness like everyone else. The Eunuch's gender identity or sexuality is not a barrier with Jesus and the God revealed and embodied by Jesus. The message is very clear, unless you're a traditionalist threatened by what the Spirit is communicating here. Your sexuality and the gender you identify as is not a barrier to full inclusion into the people of God.

The Eunuch not only lights up with joy at this revelation, but asks to be baptized. To be baptized is to be welcomed fully into the fellowship of God's people, no barriers or conditions. And Philip, not even ordained an apostle, absolutely embraces his new sibling in the faith and baptizes them. If it was the traditional faith of the PCC, neither the baptism being administered by Philip would count, and neither the Eunuch being admitted into full fellowship as a Eunuch would count. But we're told it is the Holy Spirit of God who has inspired this whole sacramental event from beginning to end. It

is of God. It is now scripture. The passage ends with the Eunuch continuing on their way back home to Ethiopia, "rejoicing" all the way.

What a story! So, what is scripture telling us here? What is God seeking to communicate to us here? Well, even as there are different passages of scripture that can be taken and interpreted in different ways, the larger story and the Spirit speaking in scripture is very clear for those open enough to change their attachment to traditional ways that exclude some from full fellowship in the church. The Holy Spirit is all about love, and love is revealed and embodied most fully when doors are opened and differences that become the basis for conflict and exclusion are overcome. The only opposition to God is hate and indifference, whether that hate and indifference is directed at others or oneself. The birth of love and the exuberant joy and fullness that come from the experience of love is when the Spirit is most truly alive. Speaking in the languages of others reveals that no difference is a barrier to God except hearts hardened by hate and indifference, racism, homophobia, bi-phobia and transphobia.

So, what will the Presbyterian Church in Canada decide this coming June? Will there be a new experience of Pentecost, a fresh flow of the Holy Spirit opening up doors and breaking down barriers? Or will we as a denomination remain stuck in our refusal to love as God loves? Well, regardless of where the PCC goes, we, at Armour Heights, like Peter, Paul and Philip, want to welcome all diversities, men and women, young and old, slave and free, eunuchs, straight and gay, gender-queer and gender transitioning... For the one solid and never-changing basis of our faith is this: God is love and this love is revealed and embodied most fully in the Jesus crucified and discarded, but now raised from the dead. Love is crucified all too often in our world, and in the church too. But love wins when it is resurrected in people who become the hands, feet and heart of Jesus in every new time and place. May we be those hands, feet and heart in our time and place. Come upon us, Holy Spirit, and lead us into greater wholeness! Amen.