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Pentecost XII
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Text: Hebrews 13:1 – 17
Title: Some Things Never Change

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It's hard to believe that Labor Day weekend is here, and with it, the unofficial end of summer. Each year this weekend brings the anticipation of things to come. If you listen closely on Tuesday morning you might just hear the combination of wailing from the kids and cheering from their parents as school begins for many students once again. It won't be long before the trees start to change into their fall colors, and the Lord's color palette will be on full display among the leaves. And on Thursday you can see the opening game of the NFL season.

For even the casual fan of the National Football League, it can be a much anticipated day as the preseason finally comes to an end and the real race for the Super Bowl begins. Between this Thursday night and next weekend, the 32 teams will begin the weekly spectacle of struggling to win as many games as possible to get into the playoffs for a chance at the title. And only when the real games begin will the coaches and fans find out if all the changes that they made in the off-season will be worth it.

Of course, not all changes are as inconsequential as what happens in a sports league. There are other changes around us that are far more serious. The tragic shooting in Minnesota this past week shows us that deadly violence can hit any one of us at any time, even in a school or a church. The disturbed shooter was someone who believed that he was able to change from being a male to being a female, and many people likely helped him with his changes. The public reaction from some shows us a change in how people today view religion as news pundits and politicians try to convince those who will listen that prayer is useless at times like this.

Yes, for better or worse just about everything in this world changes in some way sooner or later, and when you look at the world around you it's easy to see it. Changes in technology seem to come on an almost weekly basis. One day we're told that a certain food is no good for us, and the next month you'll hear a report that the same food has great health benefits when eaten in moderation. Change is so much a part of our world that we begin to believe that everything is supposed to change regularly, and when something doesn't we try to make the change happen anyway, whether it's a good change or not.

Now change in and of itself is fine, when it's supposed to happen, but forcing it to happen can lead to big problems, especially in our relationship with God. Today's reading from Hebrews 13 gives us a list of things that we Christians should keep in mind as we live our life of faith, and right in the middle of this list we are given a strong declaration about the nature of God that is so often ignored and even outright denied in today's world. Verse 8 tells us that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Right in His Word we are told that there is nothing that changes about Jesus Christ, and since it applies to Him it also applies to the Father and the Holy Spirit. Think about the enormity of that. In a world full of constantly changing inconsistencies, God is the most dependable constant in life. Of course in our sin we do everything that we can to try and force changes onto Him. Why? Because we want God to fit into what we think He should be. Our sinful nature wants to remake God in our image.

There are plenty of examples in history of people trying to change God into their own image. A number of these examples are found in the early church, but they still have echoes in different false teachings today. One taught that the Old Testament and the New Testament are talking about two entirely different gods because there seems to be such a drastic difference between them. Another example was a belief that Jesus wasn't really the Son of God, but was an

exceptionally good man who was adopted by God to be His messenger. That false teaching was serious enough that it resulted in what we know today as the Nicene Creed. There was even an example called Gnosticism that taught that God gave special, secret knowledge to those He favored. It allowed for all kinds of false teachings to enter into the faith because people could make up just about anything they wanted, and then they'd just claim that it was a special hidden message that they alone had received. The book of Galatians was probably written to refute the first Gnostics. The next verse of Hebrews warns us about this by saying, "Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings..." In other words, avoid doctrines that are different from what you already know to be true from the Scriptures. Doctrine matters.

But still, we try to remake God into something that He isn't by changing His Word to fit the way that we want to live. We continue to try and remake God into something that He isn't, but He hasn't changed since the New Testament times either. God is the same yesterday, and He is the same today. But there are still plenty of church bodies today that have decided to pick and choose which parts of God's Word are still valid and which parts they have determined to be outdated. In that way, they can justify almost anything as being a part of God's will, even things that God's Word clearly declare as sin, because if parts of God's Word are outdated then it no longer has any real authority.

But it isn't just denominations that pick and choose. Just consider some of the other parts of this list from Hebrews 13, "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers...Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for He has said, 'I will never

leave you nor forsake you.’...Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith...Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

It’s pretty easy to go through this list and find ways that we have chosen to ignore God’s will for us today. An obvious one is the statement about keeping your life free from love of money and being content with what you have. That will easily be enough to show most of us our sinful guilt. It’s pretty straightforward, and yet you and I don’t need to try very hard to find reasons to justify why we are not content with what we already have. Another way that we choose to ignore His will is in our failure to obey and submit to our leaders – the leaders who God has put in place to watch over our souls. We find it much easier to criticize them, and to maybe even decide that they don’t deserve our respect because they’re not acting in a way that suits us, even if that leader is doing their best.

Finally, we look at the Lord in terms of the future, and once again we twist Him into the type of God that we want Him to be, instead of the way that He is. It’s much easier to believe in a god that will be tolerant of all religions than the true God who declares that salvation is only to be found in Jesus Christ. Many people even go so far as to believe that God won’t really condemn anyone to hell, and that everyone will be given a free pass into heaven except maybe the most wicked of people like Adolph Hitler. But that’s not the way that God has revealed Himself to be, and whenever we choose to believe that God is different than the way He has shown Himself to be in the Scriptures then we have created a false god to replace Him.

The rest of this reading brings the sweetness of the Gospel to us today. “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood. Therefore let us go to Him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name...” In His suffering and by His blood we are rescued from the condemnation that we deserve for our idolatry. That same blood is what purifies us before His throne, and then the Holy Spirit uses the blood of Christ in the process of changing us to make us holy through our life of faith even as we share in some of the same accusations that He endured. Through Jesus we will be brought to the new city that is to come on the Last Day, the city that will be our everlasting home with Him.

It’s ironic really, that the God who doesn’t change yesterday, today or forever, actually changes us yesterday, today and forever. He brought us to faith and gave us salvation yesterday, for most of us that happened when we were baptized. There He changed us by killing our sinful nature, and then raising up a new life within us. He continues to change us today as He works to make us holy, and He will change us again to make us perfect in a glorified body forever.

But He wants to change more people than just us. His will is to change as many people as possible before forever begins, and that is why it hasn’t begun yet. God’s patience is great, and He continues to sustain the world so that as many people as possible will have the chance to hear this same Gospel and be changed with us for all eternity. So, it may not be true that some things never change, but there is One that never changes – our Triune God – and He seeks to change you. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.