

“Constantly Changing”
A Sermon by Rev. Paul Hibbard
Woodbury UMC
June 27, 2021

It feels like only yesterday I was standing on a sidewalk with Diane and Rebecca waiting for the bus to pick Rebecca up and take her to kindergarten. I still remember the tears welling up in my eyes as the bus pulled away. Now she just finished her sophomore year in college and is spending the summer in Rochester, NY. She’s not a little girl any more.

We gather here this morning – both in person and also through the gift of live streaming (thank you Theron) – with the realization that Pastor John Thomason has likely preached his last sermon from this pulpit. Some of you can probably remember his first Sunday leading worship. Listening to a first sermon from this pastor from upstate New York with a southern drawl – or is it a Texas twang. Some of you may have joined the church after Pastor’s John arrival and he is the only pastor you’ve known at the Woodbury United Methodist Church. And now you’ll be getting to know a new pastor.

Those of you who have been in the United Methodist Church for a while know this is the “Methodist Way.” There was a time in the Methodist church when the congregation would say “goodbye” to one pastor and “hello” to another every 3 – 5 years – like clockwork. And there was a time when the pastor (and the congregation) didn’t find this out until Annual Conference in June. The “Methodist Way” is just one way that we are reminded that the church, like life, is constantly changing.

Little girls change and grow up. Pastors change and move on to another church or to retirement or in some cases both. They are with us for a season and then begins a new season. Change can be hard. Sometimes we really like the season we’re in, and don’t want it to end. Some people like the crisp air of autumn and the colors of fall and are sad to see the leaves fall – not just because they need to be raked up. Some like the summer heat and sometimes move south so they can have more of it. What do we do with these constantly changing seasons? Especially when a beloved season, a beloved relationship comes to an end.

I like the advice of Dr. Seuss, “Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.”

Over the past several weeks there have been opportunities to recall and to share memories of the past eight years – the season of Pastor John if I might – through video montages, public speeches and personal conversation. And while there have been a few tears shed – not just a few by Pastor John himself – there are more than enough smiles to go around. It has been a good season, it has been a season marked by needed healing, a season of openness to the challenges that are a part of our world and our life together as a congregation, a season of celebrating all that is a part of being the body of Christ, and over the last year and a half a season of endurance and finding new ways to continue to be the church. The season of Pastor John has been a good season, and if I was to say why in one word or less, that word would be “love.”

And where there is love there is always a reason to smile.

Even when we can look back over a season and smile because it happened, change is hard. Some of the challenge can be that we knew what to expect in the season we were just in and we are not sure what to expect in the season that is just getting under way. In the midst of this change and the uncertainty that it

may bring we find ourselves looking for a constant, a firm foundation, if you will. Something that will help us to transition through the end of one season and the beginning of a new season. One thing that can help us in this transition is an understanding that every season is a gift from God. Now some seasons that seems to go without saying.

The 2018 baseball season was a gift from God. Of course you know who won the World Series that year...the Boston Red Sox. But some seasons it requires a lot of saying...like the last 4 seasons for the New York Giants. (For those of you who aren't football fans, it hasn't been good.) But even those season that we can't get through fast enough can be a gift from God. They are opportunities to learn and to grow, sometimes in ways that we never would have in a season that is all highs and no lows.

The season of the pandemic is not a season that we would ever want to go through again (and it's not a season that we quite reached the end of), but despite all the loss, all the disruptions, all the suffering that have been a part of this season, I would suggest that it has given us an opportunity to learn and grow.

We have learned new ways of doing church. Ways which open new possibilities to share the Good News of God's love with a world that interacts in ways that the old way of doing church may never have connected with. We have grown to understand, I hope, that we are all in this thing called life together, and when we pull together we can get through circumstances we may never have thought we would have to go through. We have grown to appreciate, again I hope, people and the simple things in life that we often take for granted. People like employees at grocery stores, delivery drivers, teachers, and staff at Skilled Nursing facilities and hospitals. And simple things like a handshake or a hug. Passing the peace or coffee hour.

It may be easy to see the season of Pastor John as a gift from God, but if we are able to see that God is at work in all seasons – even those seasons we would rather have missed – and for that reason they can hold a gift in them, we may be more confident about the coming season even though it is still filled with many unknowns. And a second constant or firm foundation is found in Jesus's final words as they are found in the Gospel of Matthew: “And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:20

In a constantly changing world filled with anxiety producing uncertainties and exciting possibilities, we can trust that one thing will be certain: even if we enter a season by ourselves we can be certain that we will not be alone. In a couple of weeks our new pastor will be standing in this pulpit giving his first sermon. In many ways it will inaugurate a new season for the Woodbury United Methodist Church. Rev. Cobb will look different, he will sound different (I don't believe he has a southern drawl or Texas twang). His sermons will have a different feel, his ministry priorities may be different, he will bring his own unique way of engaging with this congregation and reaching out to those outside of these walls.

But if we look for it, I believe this new season will be a gift from God. Things will change and it will be different. But one thing will not be different. In the words of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Hebrews 13:8 He is our firm foundation in this new season as he was in the season that has just ended. If we build upon this foundation – a foundation of love, a foundation of mercy, a foundation of grace and graciousness, a foundation of justice, a foundation of humility, a foundation of welcome and I'll say it again, a foundation of love – this new season will be one that we will look back on and smile because it happened.

Amen.