Jim's Sermon - August 20, 2023

You know the "How many of a certain kind of people does it take to change a light bulb jokes." Like, how many Amish does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: "What's a light bulb?"

Do you know how many Anglicans it takes to change a light bulb? "Change??"

In the Gospel reading today we have an interesting irony.

In the first part of the reading from Matthew, Jesus is castigating the Pharisees for being stuck in their ways. He has brought a new message: that the nature of God is love not anger, and the only lasting law is the law of love.

The pharisees are not having any of it. They see salvation as a matter of strict adherence to the law, including the Jewish dietary laws. Not eating pork, not having dairy and meat on the same plate, being rigorous about ritual washing, etc. They see Jesus as a threat to the status quo, to the way things have always been.

Jesus doesn't *just* criticize the pharisees, he uses what he considers to be their inflexibility to teach an important lesson; that one's actions are determined, not by circumstances, not by anything that can be blamed on someone else, not even by how well we follow the rules. Our actions are our own, our responsibility, they come from only one place, from what is in our hearts. All actions begin with our intention. Jesus does not criticize the pharisees for following the law, he criticizes them because their intention in following the law is a selfish one. They want to look good, to appear self-righteous, and to hold themselves above others. Their desire to be better than others is what

causes them to follow the rules and customs of the culture in a rigid, unbending way.

He says: it is not what we take into our mouths that determines the quality of our character, but what comes out. Because, what comes out of our mouths reflects what is within us, who we truly are.

The irony in this Gospel comes immediately after this teaching moment. Jesus has an experience that challenges his own presuppositions and religious ideas. A Canaanite woman, who we would call an Arab, a non-Jew, comes to Jesus and says: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

At first Jesus denies her because she is not Jewish.

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

This last phrase spoken by the woman out of desperation for her daughter's well-being, moves Jesus' heart. And from all appearances, he changes. He changes the way he looks at things, at his own role as a Jewish prophet. In that moment he expands the way he sees his ministry and who it is for.

Some people have a difficult time with the notion of Jesus, who is Divine, changing his mind, but why shouldn't he. Jesus emphasized the importance of relationship, relationship with self, others and God, and relationships by their nature are dynamic. Relationships can not stay static. They either grow and get better, or they deteriorate. We need to continually work on our relationships.

Without change there is no growth, there is no life, there is no need for hope. The possibility of change is that upon which our hope is founded.

The whole point of the Christian life is what the theologians used to call *metanoia,* a Greek word meaning to change one's way of thinking. We might use the word *conversion* as a way of expressing the experience of being changed by grace. Or we might talk about *transformation*.

The early Christians called their new faith, "The Way". We talk about our faith journey. Christianity is an active, dynamic way of life. It is not static.

St. Paul urges us in the letter to the Romans: " Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

So let's look a little more closely at what Jesus says about change in today's Gospel: First of all, with regard to the Pharisees, he says: "Let them alone." He doesn't suggest trying to change their minds. Quite the contrary, he suggests that it isn't worth trying. Elsewhere, he says, "Don't cast your pearls before swine." The Gospel is clear, the message is one that I often use with my Shawnigan students. There is only one person I can change, only one.

If others change as a result of our actions or words, it is they who are doing the changing. We may do or say something that is a catalyst for others to change, but we cannot change others, and according to Jesus, we shouldn't waste our time trying.

Secondly, what is it that changes Jesus' mind about the Canaanite woman?

It is not pity, it is not that he is impressed with her sadness for her daughter, it is her faith. "Great is your faith," he says.

Faith is what changes things, and not just the physical world, but faith changes what happens in the spiritual world.

People can and do change, even politicians. I was reading the other day about the notorious racist George Wallace. He was the governor of Alabama during the fight by the federal government to integrate public schools. Mr. Wallace, who fought tooth and nail against black students being admitted to white schools, ran for president of the United States in 1968 and 1972. He was shot during a campaign rally and as a result was in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. After that Wallace changed. He did a complete turn around and went from being a fanatical segregationist to a crusader for civil rights. Ultimately, we are changed by grace.

It is difficult if not impossible to embrace change without faith, because the nature of change is that it takes us into the unknown, and the nature of faith is that it grounds us in the assurance that the future is as much in God's hands as the present.

My practice over the past week or so has been to intentionally embrace change, to try new things, and to avoid doing things because they are familiar. I am trying different food, different routes for walking, different routines, and I am trying to focus my attention on different things, to see this very familiar world I live in from a different angel.

We were recently at our cabin on Reid Island with some old friends, Liz and James. James made a 12-minute video of the Island with his very sophisticated smart phone.

Watching that video gave me a whole new appreciation for that property that we have been visiting for the past 28 years. I could see the beauty of it in a new way, by seeing it through the eyes of James. I felt renewed and inspired and . . . changed. And I thought, this is the purpose of art and literature and ritual, to open us to seeing the world in new ways, with the eyes of faith.

We resist change because it is uncomfortable, and sometimes there is too much change in our lives, changes wrought by illness or death or difficulties. But the ability to change our thinking, our way of seeing, our routines and behaviors, is one of God's greatest gifts. In the Gospel Jesus models to us what it means to be open to change, even to changing big, important ideas. He also showed us how we will know when change is a good thing, we will know by listening to our hearts, to the voice inside us.

Think about the Buddhist monk who goes to the hot dog vendor and says make me one with everything, and when he gives the vendor a 10 dollar bill and asks for change, the vendor says. You know that all true change comes from within.

So, I invite you to be open in the coming days and listen to the voice from within when it nudges you to change something in your life or your thinking. It can serve you and it can serve those around you, because when we make a change, the world around us will feel that change and very often will also change, in big and little ways.