

## CH CH CH CHANGES

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee  
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### Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be

baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God? When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

**I'm sure all of you are much more exciting** and interesting and adaptable than I am because the truth is, I'm kind of boring, and I really don't love change. For someone who lives in the Bay Area, I'm also a really late adopter.

For instance, Mike recently found a great phone deal that would upgrade our phones from a version 9 to a version 22. I don't even know how they got from 9 to 22 in just four or five years, but that's beside the point.

The point is, he knew that I would resist this change. You see, I know how my old phone works; I like how my old phone works, and frankly I never think I need a new phone. But we were getting new phones.

And to help make the transition easier, Mike made sure that all the stuff on my old phone transferred onto my new phone. He also prepared me, way in advance, for a change he knew I would particularly hate.

One night he says, "There's something about all these new phones that you're really not gonna like." I responded, "What is it?" "Well," he said. "They don't have a plug for wired headphones."

Why?! Why would they do that? How is a tiny little plug for earphones hurting new cell phone models? How hard is it to just include them? I don't understand.

But Mike was very kind and researched Bluetooth headphones for me that he thought I would like, so slowly and reluctantly, I'm adjusting and embracing change.

The moral of the story is, if I can do it, so can you.

All kidding aside, though, change really is hard, even change that we've longed for and anticipated can hold grief for what no longer is.

Today's bulletin cover shows a dialogue between a caterpillar and a butterfly. Both Victor and I have used this illustration in sermons before here at Calvary. So what we don't see between the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly is what the caterpillar has to go through to become a butterfly.

The caterpillar doesn't just go into the cocoon, hibernate, and sprout wings to become this beautiful new creature. Embarrassingly, that's kind of what I thought for most of my life.

But here's what happens instead. First, the caterpillar makes this cocoon, and then it literally digests itself. It breaks down and becomes this caterpillar soup.

Any trace of the caterpillar itself cannot really be found. It goes away, almost completely unrecognizable. And only after the caterpillar has disintegrated its own tissue can it start to rebuild itself from the few imaginal discs that remain to form wings, and antennae, and legs.

Undergoing change can feel like we've lost our identity completely. You may feel like caterpillar soup right now. But within that soup are the proteins and the few core pieces of identity that cannot be taken or digested away which then give birth to what is new.

The darkness of the cocoon, the soup that we become, all of that is necessary for something new to take hold and bring about new life.

Change is not easy!

And these days, it seems like change comes upon us so quickly:

Shutting down for a pandemic, figuring out masks and sanitizer, learning Zoom, going back in person, learning to wear pants again, it's all a lot.

And these past two years have been more than a lot.

In the midst of so much change, I often find comfort in a God whom scripture deems "unchanging." In fact, the letter to the Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever," (Hebrews 13:8).

I love holding onto and trusting in an eternal, ever-present, and ever-reliable God.

The thing is, though, sometimes the church thinks that we should not change because God is unchanging. And that, my friends, is simply not true.

While God and the characteristics of God remain unchanging, God is not static or monotonous. And our lives of faith, and how the church responds to God in a changing world, *must* also adapt and be transformed.

I think this is particularly uncomfortable for the church and for those who call ourselves Christians because tradition is such a big part of our identity. The way things have always been done, helps us to feel rooted and connected to God. Those rituals and songs and traditions awaken the holy within us to allow us to recognize the holy that is all around us.

The danger is, however, that we can become so stuck in our ways, that we start making tradition an idol, meaning something we worship and hold in importance above God.

Now we worship a God whose characteristics don't change, but whose methods and ways of connecting with us certainly do seem to change and adapt and respond to humanity in many different ways.

Scripture tells us that God once used tablets of stone to help guide the people.

And then there were judges, but Israel really wanted a monarchy, so God provided kings. There have been prophets, plagues, pillars of fire and wind, burning bushes, and even silence used by God to try and connect with humankind.

And then there was that real "out of the box" and into a manger idea - a baby - the Emmanuel, God with us, the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, the incarnation of God, fully human, fully divine who lived and dwelled and breathed among us, whose birth alone changed everything!

Our scripture lesson for today comes after all these revelations of God, in the midst of the early church as they try to figure out what it means to be a community that follows Jesus after his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

In today's scripture, Peter, one of the first apostles, shares his vision of inclusion with his fellow followers. In his vision, a sheet comes down from the heavens filled with food that was forbidden for consumption by the purity codes of his time and tradition.

A voice tells him to eat, but concerned for doing what's right, Peter refuses. He is only being a devout follower the best way he knows how. And yet, this voice challenges him saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

What Peter thought he knew, the boundaries and divisions he assumed existed, are defied by this vision. And so the church responds and changes.

From its very beginning over 2000 years ago, the Christian faith has had to embrace change and transformation for the sake of God's love that is unapologetically inclusive of all.

Today's scripture tells us of one those ground-breaking, pivotal moments of change, the inclusion of the Gentiles. Most of us sitting here today have benefited from that amendment made to early church policy.

And so, our faith and how we live it out, is always changing, as it should be.

After all, Jesus started it. It's the way of Jesus. And the way he interpreted scripture, the way he lived out his life of faith, it changed everything!

Adam Hamilton, a Methodist pastor and author, in his book, *Making Sense of the Bible* writes:

"As you read the Gospels, you'll find that Jesus routinely challenges the prevailing interpretation of scripture and regularly calls his hearers ... to move beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law.

He frustrates the religious leaders by his refusal to abide by the Sabbath restrictions, noting that it is okay to heal or to pluck grain on the Sabbath because 'the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27) ...

At the same time, (Jesus) he called upon his followers to see the deeper call of the commandments. He noted that while the commandment prohibits adultery, we're not to even look at another with lust in our hearts. Whereas the Law forbids taking out extraordinary revenge, limiting justice to an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, Jesus said his followers were to love their enemies and forgive."<sup>(1)</sup>

I find comfort in knowing that Jesus himself was not a literalist when it came to scripture. He did not believe that the scriptures were inerrant or infallible. He was willing to interpret scripture from a new perspective.

Jesus read the Hebrew scriptures through the lens of the two greatest commandments:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ...

And You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40)."

Love was his hermeneutic, and using that lens, he was free to make changes, and by doing so transformed lives. He even allowed himself to be changed for the sake of radical inclusion and love. So we don't change just for the sake of being popular or in with the new fads or relevant to today's culture. We change for love.

And we don't regress into draconian times when people had less rights and less dignity and less humanity than we do today.

We change for love that allows for all people to live life fully and abundantly as beloved children of God which means with the presence of peace and justice.

After all, as Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Now, this congregation, traces its roots back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And what we learned from those protestors and reformers is that the church is "reformed and always reforming."

So it is part of our call *and* our heritage to be changed, to not stay the same, to question tradition and how we've always done it, again not to be trendy or cool (because I guarantee you, I will never be those things!) but to remain faithful followers of Jesus whose way was love.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Hamilton, Adam. *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*. Harper One: New York, pg 51.

Jesus was the first reformer, and his tradition of change should continue still to this day. That trajectory of transformation, which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr once said, "bends towards justice," must continue with us still today.

We are in good company when we embrace change (kicking and screaming if we have to) because that is the story of love. And that is work of the Spirit.

It doesn't mean everything has to change all the time. But it does mean that we must be open to listening for where God is calling us next.

Who we are as individuals and who Calvary will be in fifteen years should not be the same as it is today. Fifteen years ago, those in relationships as part of the LGBTQIA community could not be ordained in our denomination. Fifteen years ago, legal marriage was not an option for same-sex couples. Fifteen years ago, Calvary had never had a woman as the pastor and head of staff.

Change can be good. Change can be necessary. Change can be faithful, as long as we are led by love, filled with love, and live in love.

So go and be changed, but not only that. As Mahatma Gandhi is said to have proclaimed: Go and "be the change," embody change, embrace change, and create change.

The world awaits. So let us go. Thanks be to God, Amen.