

**Church: Pizza, with PB & J**

**April 30, 2023**

You know when you're a public speaker, which is what a preacher is, sometimes you insert something to see if people are still awake or have a sense of humor. That scripture lesson should have accomplished both.

"Women, keep silent in the church...be in submission...if you have a question, wait 'till you get home and ask your husband."

That was St. Paul, writing to a still young church in the ancient Greek city of Corinth around the year 53.

He's one of the foundational thinkers of the Church, writing to

One of the foundational teachings of the Church, to

One of the foundational churches of the Church.

Yet, things have changed. Not entirely, of course. Way more than half of Christianity today would stand by those verses, Protestant and Catholic and Orthodox and not allow a woman preacher, for example.

But, yes, a lot has changed.

Christianity has matured, grown up, but a lot of critics would say "not enough."

Just like America has grown up, but critics would say "not enough."

And I've grown up, but critics would say "not enough."

That's the nature of at least healthy institutions:

Change

Adjust

Mature

Respond

Or fritter away, dwindle, shrivel up.

As a young pastor, I was called by two churches in update New York to be their pastor; a once thriving Baptist church and a once thriving Presbyterian church, and my job was to bring them together, to thrive a little longer. Almost immediately one of the top Baptist donors invited me to lunch to tell me they would not give any more money.

“It’s not that I hate Presbyterians,” they said. “I just don’t want to go to church with them.”

So, I asked if they would help me out by giving one last donation to the church, much less than their usual pledge, but something, please. I asked for \$250. They agreed and I thanked them. As I left, they asked what I needed the \$250 for.

“We need to put up a good ‘For Sale’ sign,” I said.

Change isn’t easy for anyone or anything, never has been, never will be. Nobody wants “apple carts” upset, theirs, or society’s.

The status quo always seems safer no matter how obviously it isn’t.

Why haven’t the people of Russia risen up against Putin,

The people of China risen up against X.

The North Koreans against what’s his name?

When we have self-destructive lifestyles or habits, why is it more daunting to change?

And yet it often is.

Christianity is rooted in change, it's our M.O. It's our "raison d'être," excuse my French, "reason for being."

That's why Jesus chose three interesting descriptions for Christians:

We are to be "salt of the earth,"

"yeast in the bread,"

"light of the world."

Salt. Yeast. Light.

Change agents. Each one changes whatever it is added to.

What is the very first word Jesus uttered when he began his public ministry? "Repent."

Oh, we don't like that one, everyone mocks it. It's one of several old fashion words that have fallen out of favor, but are mostly still true, still needed, still useful.

Words like:

"conversion"

"Confession," yes "repent"

Plus "revival,"

"penance,"

"indulgences,"

We may not like the old-fashioned terminology, but we all know full well we need changes, from the mundane and the personal to the serious and institutional and even the world around us.

Look at the words again.

Conversion literally means change. You were one kind of person; you decide to become another kind of person. Your car has a “catalytic convertor.” Why? It takes toxic stuff from your engine that’s bad for us and makes it better. That’s conversion, a word we don’t like for something we all need in one part of our life or another.

From personal sins to society ills, from a bad haircut to a kitchen renovation, from an old church to old joints, change brings hope.

Repentance literally means to “turn around.”

You were headed in one direction, a wrong direction. You admit that – that’s what “confession” is, “I was wrong.”

And now you repent, you reverse course, you find the right path.

Even those old scary words from medieval, “Dark Ages” Christianity words like “penance” and “indulgence” were designed to push you into change. They have to do with punishment for your badness, and maybe if you have to pay enough for your badness,

In money,

In time,

In purgatory,

In suffering,

In sacrifice,

In pilgrimage

Maybe you won't do it again, that's the idea, maybe you'll think twice, maybe you'll change, repent, convert. In the words of St. Paul, you'll "put off the old, put on the new...become a new person" (Ephesians 4: 22-24)

One could easily argue that the whole purpose of religion, ours and most everybody else's, is to provide some framework for life that will keep us from going off the rails.

Islam and Judaism with their strong emphasis on laws and strong sense of God's justice.

Buddhism and Hinduism, with their ideas of Dharma, Karma, Right Actions, Noble Truths and even reincarnation – all trying to keep on right side of doing the wrong thing.

To stay on the right side, most of us need to change from time to time, in ways large or small. When I gave up smoking a pipe after 40 years, what worked were the changes I made. Giving up smoking was easy; I'd done it 100 times. I used to throw out tobacco in the backyard at 7pm and by midnight be out there with a flashlight scraping through the grass trying to find enough to fill a pipe bowl. I literally smoked grass! I'd break a pipe in half and put in the garbage and the next day tape it back together. Oh yeah, I could quit with the best of them.

But nothing changed until I changed. I was told to change the location where I smoked, change the chair I sat in when I smoked, change when and where I did my reading while I smoked. I literally threw out the desk I sat at, moved out the chair I sat in, changed my reading

from evening smoking time to morning breakfast time. That's a mundane issue on one level, perhaps a health-related issue, potentially a life-saving issue. Maybe not so mundane.

The Bible is full of changes. Behavior, location, purpose, direction, job. When God called Moses to save the Israelites, Moses had to move back to Egypt. When God called Paul to spread Christianity, Paul had to move out into the world. Jacob was led by God to go back home. Abraham was ordered to leave home. God pushed Elijah to get back to his job. Jesus pushed Matthew and Peter to quit their jobs. In most every situation, someone gets stuck in this, that, or the other and God unstuck them. That's change.

This sermon isn't vague, but it's broad enough that you and I can apply it wherever the shoe fits. If you've been drinking too hard, too long, with too many consequences, you probably need to change right now, 9:25am or 11am, this very day.

If you've been late to everything your whole life, maybe you need to change tomorrow, get up on time, get to work on time, do your stuff on time.

If you hate your job, you are unfulfilled in something major in your life, you need change in perhaps six months, or a year, when you can plan for it, lay the groundwork for it.

But in each example, and a thousand more for our 1000-member church, change needs to come.

The idea of change is always controversial, always; always challenging and always hopeful. I don't know how many of you are as baseball nuts like Mike Ruble and I, two old catchers, but we've been chatting about the changes in baseball this year.

People said the games were too long, so now there's clocks monitoring how many seconds a batter has to get set to hit, how many seconds a pitcher gets to pitch. People said that wasn't enough action, so they've required fielders to spread out, not clump together, AND they've made the bases bigger. AND they've outlawed pitchers using sticky stuff on their fingers to make the ball move. They want more action in a sport long held-bound by tradition, that prided itself on being timeless, historic.

So far?

Glitches? Yes

Success? Yes

But the idea is to improve the product. Because, viewership is down, participation is down, attendance is down, excitement is down, baseball's dominant place in America is lost. That's not a bad summary of religion in America, church in America.

We can change. Or stay stuck in our apple cart, status quo past, proudly proclaiming, "we never changed." The challenge for any individual, any institution, any aspect of society, is what to change, when, and how.

Look at pizza.

To me, pizza is close to sacred. Especially what is known now as "slice pizza," a retro thing that is hitting some neighborhoods based on my old neighborhood. In my neighborhood, a pizza place always had an open window facing the sidewalk. You go up, order a "slice," and it was delivered to you in wax paper, dribbling grease, the more grease the better. I don't believe I



ever saw a full pie or ate a slice off a plate until I was in grad school. Now, forget about it.

There's pizza with pineapple, with corn, with salad, for Pete's sake.

At one of our church parties, the Big Green Pizza Truck served pizza with mashed potato. Mashed potato. A longtime pizzeria in Massachusetts was asked their most unusual but often-requested pizza. You ready? With peanut butter and jelly. Has America lost its way?! How'd this happen?

Come on, we're all some sort of capitalists here. We know: the pizza guy wanted to sell more pizza. With vegetarians not ordering the pepperoni, vegans not wanting the cheese, how do you bring in more customers, sell more pizza? Well, you figure out what people want, need, will order, wait for, return for, remember.

But I'm up here on my high horse offended that my sacred greasy slice on wax paper tradition now shares life with people who eat mashed potato, salad, or PB & J pizza!

Why? What's it to me? How does it impact my life for some other aspect to be changed, converted, improved? If the pizza business is booming, and I can still get my pepperoni, why can't I rejoice in change that others like? Well, it's obvious from the sermon I embrace change, I believe it, I personally need it.

But I'm not glib about it. I want my old baseball stadiums. I've spent 70 years trying to find the lemon chiffon ice cream of my childhood, I like literature with a plot. I don't want movies to be gross. I spent most a recent week complaining to Alida about a new Netflix series that is really good, really timely and so filthy, foul-mouthed vulgar that, prude that I'm not, I'm repulsed, and sent a letter of protest.

So, there's plenty of "I love the way things used to be" attitude in me, about my personal life, about the world around me, about church. But we can't get that attitude get us stuck. As I said earlier, much of Christianity is designed to "unstuck" us. I dare say change is key to a faithful, spiritual, even successful personal life. And professional.

On Easter, our Easter responsibilities as pastors ended at 1pm. By 5pm, Alida and I were at JFK. At that very moment we started evaluating every aspect of Easter, Holy Week, Lent. What needs to be changed? What didn't work? What should we try new? What can we do better? There isn't anything that can't be better. I was brought up that way. I believe it. I live it.

As Covid diminished, Alida and I did one of those ticketed, time visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, just after they finished renovating some of the main classic art galleries. Why on earth did they need to spend money renovating those galleries?!! Some of the world's greatest art, in one of the greatest museums, what could be better? Turns out a new paint job, better lighting, adjusted placement created a whole new better experience, clearly.

OK. Almost done. We began with the bombastic scripture from St. Paul telling women to "sit down, shut up, go home, wait for husband." Christianity is 2000 years old, and we've done things good, and bad; smart and stupid; right and wrong; loving and hateful; Christlike and demon-like.

Every good thing Christianity has done, our critics can match with some great evil Christianity did.

Every evil thing Christianity has done I can more than match with great good Christianity did.

The best of Christianity has come from change. We had to tackle a lot of heavy stuff, still are. We had to get rid of a lot of baggage, still are. We had to correct a lot of mistakes. All in an attempt to be better, wiser, healthier, truer, brighter. At every point along the way someone had the courage, or the vision, to say, "that's not who we are." Or "that's the way it used to be, but no more." OR the full range, from "that's wrong" to "that's out of date" or even "that makes no sense." That's how we have Alida as the pastor. And thus, it is correct to say, "we've come a long way." And, it is correct to say, "We've got a way to go."

Pass me a slice of peanut butter and jelly pizza!