

“BECOMING THE CHURCH OF TOMORROW TODAY”

(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

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1. Read Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 and Pray.
2. **CHANGE:** “*To alter, modify, or give a different... direction to; to make a shift from one to another; the process of becoming different.*” ¹

A–Change has an ironic way on the one hand of causing intense discomfort and disequilibrium, and yet on the other also stirring our adrenaline and stoking our passion.

B–We literally can’t exist *without* it; yet, quite often it seems that we can’t easily live *with* it, either.

C–For some people, change comes far too fast; for others, not nearly fast enough.
3. Yet, we’ve probably all heard before that “Change” is “*the only constant in the entire universe*” – it’s the one thing we can count on happening and occurring in life. ²

A–And so the hard truth is that we can’t become who we need to be tomorrow unless we’re willing to change who we are today.

B–Change enables us to break free from the past, adapt to the present, and prepare for the future. ³

C–And if this is true, then HOW does the church of Jesus Christ live and work and minister in such a world? How are we to share the unchanging, unchangeable message of God in a world that is exactly opposite that?
4. Today’s scripture reading from 1 Corinthians 11 is the story of the apostle Paul recounting the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples before his death, and his words here later became what we call the “*words of institution*” when we have Holy Communion/The Lord’s Supper.

A–Well, as we celebrate who we are as a church here at East Cobb UMC, today I want us to use this scripture to talk about what *change* means for us as a church.

B–According to this passage, what does biblical change actually look like? and are there some parameters that can guide us when we’re going through times of change?

C– In short, what does it mean to become the “*Church of Tomorrow... Today*” ?

D–In your bulletin you’ll find a box that I want to encourage each of you to use to write down *three biblical principles* that I want all of us to remember in dealing with change.

–II–

5. First of all, the Church of Tomorrow is always **BUILDING ON THE PAST.**

A–In Verse 23, Paul begins by saying, “*I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you...*” – in other words, Paul is saying that he *isn’t* making this stuff up from scratch, but instead is admitting that there is a sense of history and heritage behind it.

B–Think about it: the meaning of what we today call Holy Communion was built essentially over the Jewish understanding and celebration of what was called the “*Passover.*”

1–You may remember that the Passover was an annual festival that commemorated the biblical story (in Exodus) of God’s “angel of death” *passing over/sparing* the lives of the Hebrew children, leading the Egyptian Pharaoh finally to agree to free the Hebrew people from bondage.

2–For over a thousand years, the Jewish people had celebrated this event through a meal and ritual that consisted primarily of unleavened bread and wine. ⁴

3–So when, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus was in an upper room and (in the words of Paul) he “*took a loaf of bread,... gave thanks,... broke it and said ‘This is my body that is broken for you,... this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this... in remembrance of me’*” he was NOT creating some new ritual from scratch.

4–No. He was *building on* its original meaning and *reinterpreting* it in a new way. ⁵

C–Now, this is vitally important, because in today’s world our tendency (even in the church) is to toss out the OLD as being out of touch & irrelevant as we make room for the NEW; and in the process, we inadvertently end up “*tossing the baby out with the bathwater.*”

D–But what we learn from Jesus in this story about the Last Supper is that the church of tomorrow never *discards* the past, but instead *builds* on it as it moves into the future.

E–To those of you who regularly worship at our Kenyan or 9:45 HeartLight service, let me say this: *...tradition* is not your enemy (*traditionalism*, perhaps, but not tradition).

1–No. Countless churches around the world today are *rediscovering* that the rich tradition of Christian heritage, done *well*, with a few changes, is *precisely* what is drawing today’s young generations into strong, vibrant contemporary worship experiences that touch their hearts, minds, and souls.

2–We don't need to be scared of or embarrassed by the church of the past in order to order to move with conviction and power into the future – we instead need to *build on that past*.

6. A second principle I want us to remember in dealing with change is that the Church of Tomorrow is always **WORKING TOGETHER IN THE PRESENT**.

A–In Verses 24 and 25, we need to know that the word “you” in both of these verses is plural (I.E., “*This is my body that is broken for YOU [ALL]. ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as YOU [ALL] drink it...*”)

B–Let's consider for a minute the make up of some of the “you (all)” that Jesus was talking to at the Last Supper.

1–Among others, you had **James** and **John**, called *Boanerges* (or “*Sons of Thunder*”) by Jesus because they were always so outspoken and arguing with each other.

2–There was **Philip**, who was in charge of provisions – he was a detail person, a good administrator, but one who often found it hard to see the big-picture.

3–There was **Matthew**, a tax collector – viewed in that time as a Roman collaborator, and opposite that, there was **Simon the Zealot** – a group known for their radical, military terrorist tactics to throw out the Romans.

4–Of course, there was the other **Simon**, to whom Jesus gave the name “**Peter**” (Rocky), perhaps because of his rock-firm faith, but more likely because he was so stubborn and “stone/hard headed.”

5–And of course there was **Judas, Iscariot** (meaning “assassin”), who would later betray Jesus to the authorities.

6–They were from all over Palestine. Some were highly educated; others not at all.

C–I could go on, but I hope you see my point:...here at the Last Supper was a group of individuals who were all very different, who didn't always get along, who each had very different ideas about how to live and practice faith, but who were all *united* at a table around a common person and message.

7. Now, I know that some of you today have questioned why we occasionally have combined, blended services – some of you don't like this (& some probably stayed away today because we did!).

A–But if you'll allow me to speak bluntly: ...growing up, most of us didn't like to eat vegetables; but our parents made us because it was good for us, right?

1–Well friends, just as Jesus did with those first disciples at his Last Supper, we need to be reminded that as Christians, there are times that we do things *not* because it makes us feel comfortable or cozy, but simply because it's *good* for us...

2–...Because it's the right thing to do! ...Because it gets us out of our selfish shells and reminds us that we are to “*love **one another** (through our differences) as Christ loved **us** (in our differences)!*”⁶

B--Do you remember the words of Verse 3 of the old camp song “They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love”? It went like this:

“We will work with each other, we will work side by side. (Repeat) And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

1–Just like those first disciples, here at ECUMC we have an *amazing diversity* of personalities, talents, ethnic backgrounds, political and theological beliefs, and even of styles of worship and ministry that we like.

2–We don’t always agree on everything, and we don’t always get along perfectly with each other.

3–But like those first disciples at the Last Supper, we’re not called to BE alike; we’re called to “*work together in the present*” around a common Savior, who gave us one common mission of “*Sharing the Love and Light of Jesus with a Changing World.*”

8. A third and final principle that today’s scripture teaches us when dealing with change is that the Church of Tomorrow is always **BUILDING TOWARDS THE FUTURE**.

A–Verse 26, “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death **until he comes [again]***” – notice that even in this ritual from the *past*, there’s a *forward* orientation.

B–I mentioned earlier that the church of tomorrow should never discard the past. Well, I need to add here that neither does it *worship* or *idealize* that past, either.

1–And yet, isn’t that precisely what some of us tend to do? We romanticize the “*good ole’ days*” of the past? the “*glory days gone by,*” & how grand things *used* to be?

2–The truth of the matter is that the “good ole’ days” really weren’t so good – they had their own sets of problems and challenges like today. But even still we tend to prefer “*the devil we know over the one we don’t.*”

C–I spoke earlier to our regular Kenyan and HeartLight worshipers – let me now say this to those of you who worship regularly at one of our traditional services: ...“new” and “contemporary” and “change” are not your enemy (*unless* its change for change’s sake alone, just to keep up with the church down the street!).

1–No. Change is our friend. The “contemporary” can bring new life and new passion to those of us stuck in bondage to our past. Change can be our salvation.⁷

2–In the words of one author, “*If we are to better the future, [then] we must disturb the present.*”⁸

D–You see, being a church of tomorrow means we step out in faith, risking new things, new ways, new styles of ministry—building *on* the past, yes; but building *towards* the future!⁹

1–Many of these new things will fail. Some of them *won’t*.

2–Many of them will be very difficult if not impossible to achieve. Some of them we’ll achieve *anyway*.

3–To some of you, these things won’t go far enough or fast enough to satisfy. To others, *whatever* we do will be too much.

4–MOST of these things will make most of us very uncomfortable. But, they’ll also be tools that God will use to deepen our souls, and expand our trust in Him.

–III–

9. So you see, if we want to make it through times of change in our personal as well as our corporate life together as a people of faith, we need to remember to...

A–(1) ***Build on the Past***, (2) ***Work Together in the Present***, and (3) ***Build Towards the Future***.

B–Holy Communion is both an example and a reminder of all three of these.

C– So as we come forward in just a few moments to participate in this Sacrament, I invite us to use it as an opportunity to recommit ourselves to being the Church of Tomorrow ...Today.

10. [PRAY]

11. [HOLY COMMUNION]

ENDNOTES:

1. “Change,” Merriam Webster online dictionary (www.m-w.com/dictionary/change)

2. Our bodies change; nature changes; science tells us that even the very ground on which we are standing right now is in constant motion because of the movement of tectonic plates caused by the force of molten lava beneath our earth’s crust.

3. One example was today’s skit that was our scripture reading: it reminded us that we only have the Bible in a form and a manner that we can understand because someone in the past was willing to change.

As we heard, today’s passage was written originally in the Greek language. What we didn’t hear is that around the third-century A.D., it was translated into Latin (called the “Vulgate” translation), the

language of the Roman Empire. And for nearly a millennium and a half, Latin remained the language that the Bible was read in. But in the 1500s, people began change the way the Bible was experienced by translating it into other languages, even at the cost of their own lives.

One of these was the 1611 King James Version in English, which was (in its day) a radical, contemporary translation of the holy scriptures. But today (400 years later), these words seem antiquated and out of touch with culture. So, we have nearly 100 English translations on the market right now, one of which is the very popular translation called THE MESSAGE that we heard at the end of the skit.

Remember, each of these translations was a change from the previous versions for the sake of reaching the coming generations, so that even we today can now connect with the great story of the Bible from the past because someone in the past was willing to change for us.

4. Hence, the festival of Passover is also referred to as the “Festival of Unleavened Bread.”

5. It is true that the scriptures are unclear as to whether or not Jesus intended Lord’s Supper to actually *take the place of* the Passover meal itself. For example, according to the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the Last Supper *was* the Passover meal (Matthew 26:17-19; Mark 14:12, 16; Luke 22:7, 13). In the gospel of John, however, the last meal *preceded* the Passover celebration (John 13:1; John 18:28). In John, Jesus was crucified on the day of preparation at the time when lambs were slaughtered (John 19:14). This would make the Last Supper only a supper that *preceded* Passover, but was NOT intended to supplant it.

What *is* clear, however, is that the fundamental message and meaning of the Jewish Passover (release from bondage) *was* in Jesus’ mind when he instituted the Lord’s Supper, which is one reason it became one of the key sacraments of the Christian church. However one understands the connection of the Last Supper to the actual Passover meal, the Lord Supper as celebrated by Christians today is nevertheless still viewed and practiced at least as a *fulfillment* and *continuation* of the Passover meal, even if it was not the meal itself.

6. Read John 13:34

7. Let’s not make the mistake of assuming that “*what worked for my generation will surely work for th next ones!*” We can’t do ministry in 2007 the way we did in 1950 and expect to reach today’s generations.

8. Catherine Booth, *The Life of Catherine Booth* (Volume 2), cited from an article in the magazine *Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 6. Many of us have heard it before: ...the seven words of a dying church are, “*We’ve never done it that way before.*” As your pastor, I’ll be honest, those are words I don’t want to hear. We might think them, but they’re not words of faith or trust in God.

9. In other words, the church of the future will still contain the “spiritual DNA” of the church of the past, if you will. As such, we’re to *lean into* the future, not rest on the laurels of our past. The image here is that of a traveler, face forward, leaning forward *into* and *towards* the wind and the path ahead of them, rather than being blow about by the winds around them.