

Text: *Isaiah 42: 9* . . .the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare. . .”

### **Religious Life/Personal Life: Learning to Love Change**

You just think that change is a six-letter word. To some people it is always a four-letter word and to all of us it is sometimes a four-letter word. Whether we like it or not, we are immersed in change. One can only wonder at the reaction of people in a small country, occupied by a foreign army, to the change proposed by an upstart son of a carpenter! At His baptism a voice from heaven may well have said: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” But it did not take long before the authorities, both religious and civil, were not pleased at all. Jesus proposed changes to the religious establishment that would ultimately have repercussions for the government powers. Those changes were so threatening that the chief proponent of those changes had to be eliminated. Jesus was executed by the establishment for His actions as an agent of change.

Jesus only real threat was to substitute the rule of love for the love of rules! But, that was enough. That was all it really took to challenge the structure of religious and governmental power. We no longer execute bishops, priests or laypeople who don’t know their proper place in the scheme of things but we do still have mighty battles over the love of rules. Let us spend a few minutes looking at both religious change and personal change in the light of the Jesus mandate of the rule of love.

**Religious Change:** At the level of the institutional church very few changes in our beliefs have occurred. The church has removed a few categories of sin from the purview of the church, but that is about all. Women no longer have to cover their heads in church, and matters of divorce and human sexuality are now personal, not church, concerns. Although the changes have been few, they certainly generated great debate and even church secessions. Reading some of the comments on the changes made one think that we were debating the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth and the existence of God, all rolled into one!

Some practices were changed which created strong feelings. The foremost of these was the ordination of women. Although opposed by some, it is difficult today to imagine the Episcopal Church without formal women leadership. From presiding bishop to parish priest, women play an enormous role in the life of the Episcopal Church.

These changes in belief and practice at the national and diocesan level, produced some changes for parishes as well. Changes related to inclusiveness caused difficulty for some, but rather few, parishes. Parish battles were more likely to revolve around placement of the altar and worship music. Having the priest stand behind the altar, facing the congregation, was somehow seen as a lessening of respect for God. However, I do not recall any lightning bolts from heaven when the change was made. Worship music changes seemed to follow generational lines with younger members of the parish agitating for bands and modern music, while older parishioners opted for traditional music and instruments. The problem in larger churches was frequently solved by having multiple services.

**The solution** to the problems produced by change is simple to state although sometimes difficult to implement: Rally around Jesus. Remembering the greatest commandment is the cure for all of our churchly ills. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (*Matthew 22: 37-40*) Differences in church beliefs and practice pale into insignificance in the light of this commandment.

**Personal change:** Of course, it is not just our religious environment that changes; our personal space changes as well. The very nature of our occupation may change, as we experienced during the pandemic lockdown. Teachers suddenly had to become television stars and deal with an unfamiliar technology. Health care workers quickly learned how to have virtual visits with patients. In many cases those changes persisted even after the pandemic emergency was largely over. Workplace interpersonal relationships underwent a real change. Supervisory behavior and the power structure of the workplace was often forever altered.

In the past few decades family life has been heavily impacted by change. Geographical mobility has increased, several different kinds of family have come into existence, male and female roles have altered, and separation and divorce have become even more common. Unfortunately, family violence has also become more visible. All of these things, both the good and the bad, impose change and stress on family members. Some thrive, some families do not.

Of course, it is not just work and family that is subject to change, our very notion of self-worth and individuality have undergone a transformation. We demand recognition by society of the development of all of our roles, parent, worker, worshipper, hedonist – we fully expect to be able to develop as whole people, even when we might have a very hazy notion of what that means!

**The solution** for personal change is the same as for religious change: Rally around Jesus. As difficult as it may be to follow the Jesus mandate of love, when applied to workmates or neighbors, we must not be embarrassed to attempt that feat. Failure is a certainty, but that is not a reason to stop trying. Our neighbors are the world. Our guide to the world should be Jesus.

There are a couple of practical steps to remember. First, we must realize that only college sophomores can save the whole world. For the rest of us, it is one inter-action at a time – one friend, one workmate, one child, one spouse at a time. Secondly, Jesus love does not have to be big and demonstrative. A kind word, an understanding ear, a friendly gesture. That is all it takes. And finally, be persistent. Outlast unpleasantness.

Remember: The love of rules is the pathway to unhappiness. The Jesus rule of love produces understanding and peace. Amen