

April 18

Change You Can Believe In

Matt 18:1-6; 2 Cor. 3:16-18

How do you like my original title? I was looking for something that might get your attention. I know it's a hot potato phrase which is why I used it. I love hot potatoes with butter, cheese, sour cream and green onions.

I doubt that Jesus registered this slogan as a trademark phrase, but he was the first to proclaim *change we actually can believe in*. No other person can give us such change, though many have tried. It is simply beyond human ability. Only Jesus can give us real change we can trust. Jesus is the author of change; the Holy Spirit the power of change.

When I was in high school, my barber tried to talk me into doing something different with my hair. I had that late 60s, early 70s look with hair down to the eyes and as long as my parents would allow. He would say, *I can cut your hair in a way that would improve the overall look of your face and hair*. And even though I needed that, I wouldn't let him change it. I couldn't be sure of what it was going to look like; and you can't put hair back on after you cut it. So I got the same cut over and over again.

My inability to believe in change goes way back, especially if we're talking about political change. From my years in grade school and high school the Vietnam War escalated and the American people were told this was a change we could believe in. I was just out of high school when the Watergate scandal broke and Mr. Nixon was giving us change only he could believe in. Every time taxes have been raised or cut, we have been told that we can trust our leaders to do what's best for the country. And along the way, many of us found out we couldn't believe in that change after all.

In the 60's a new generation started marketing social change we could believe in. We were encouraged to challenge and change social norms in the pursuit of freedom and happiness. Buy yourself a VW bus, preferably orange, paint flowers on the side, put some black lights and posters inside; smoke something called weed and enjoy whatever sexual adventures met your fancy. This was anti-establishment change we could believe in, until we got a job, started a family and got stuck with a mortgage.

There are certainly changes we'd like to believe in (world peace, a strong economy, food and work enough for every person), but only the most idealistic or naïve among us actually believes trustworthy change comes out of government, party or social trend.

We continue to be inundated by change we don't believe in at all. We never trust change if there's even a minute chance it could ruin something good about our lives. Why does the woman stay with the abusive husband when there's a shelter across town? Because she's afraid leaving will make life even harder. Why do residents of mining towns keep going into the mines? They are afraid no one can make a living otherwise. Why have gun and ammunition sales gone off the charts? People are afraid they are going to lose their rights. Why do we press our doctors for reality in their diagnosis? Because we're more afraid of the unknown than the known; because the evil we know isn't as bad as the evil that lurks in the dark.

Why do we keep sending the same people to Congress even though we don't approve of effectiveness? Because we are afraid we might get someone worse. **Fear never wants change because fear just can't believe. Find resistance to change and you'll find fear.**

**How does this emotional and intellectual skepticism about change (very reasonable) affect our emotional and intellectual capacity to be changed by God?** Does our disbelief or cynicism stop at the door when we walk into this room? Do we suddenly shift from change we can't believe in to change we can because we're at church? Or do we bring that same distrust

into the reality where Christ is making all things new? Do we unknowingly reject the change we can really believe in because we're skeptical of the other kind?

We have heard from two biblical passages this morning that describe change we must believe in to be a part of God's kingdom. The key phrase in Matthew 18 is ***unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*** Becoming like a child doesn't seem so bad but the only way to get there is by change. I embrace the most obvious meaning of this phrase which is: you must repent, believe and start over. We must become people who are nurtured in the ways of Jesus rather than in the ways of this world. Change, change, change; physical, mental, emotional; not once, but throughout life. We cannot enter the kingdom without change; without transformation.

In 2 Cor. Paul described the essential quality of change when he wrote, ***And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.*** This is not a phrase that describes change as a point in time, such as the time you asked God to forgive you and save you. No, Paul is describing a spiritual movement from one degree to another; from new birth to death. He's describing incremental transformation we can trust.

Change was central to the mission and message of Jesus. The story of the **Prodigal Son** is a story of a young man who changed his mind and direction. Jesus told the parable of **two sons**, one who said he would do what his Father asked but didn't; and the other who said he would not but changed his mind and did. Clearly, the one who moved from disobedience to obedience did the Father's will.

Jesus began his ministry by transforming **water into wine**; the end of celebration became a new beginning. He moved from town to town, he didn't set up shop in one place and say *ya'll come*. When Jesus taught, he was changing people. When he healed, he was changing people. When he died, he was changing the world forever.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that as we grow in faith, we leave behind our elemental understandings of Christ. Paul, the missionary who went through radical change, said in Romans that we are transformed by the renewing, the changing of our minds.

Our problem is not that we reject these biblical ideas of transformation out of hand. We would all likely affirm that the good news is about change that happens in our lives and our world.

The problem is more emotional and cultural. We think God can change us without any commitment or openness to change on our part. We have been baptized into the fear and skepticism that hangs like a fog over our world. These fears override our theology and our willingness to go anywhere for God. Our culture resistance poisons our ability to embrace spiritual change. We dig in our heels because of changes we don't believe in and tragically resist change God believes in.

Early Baptists were apparently more courageous than we are because theirs was a movement, not an establishment. Early Baptists were Separatists; that is they were going to pull away from the powerful established church to go their own way. They began this journey with a commitment to study the Bible and conform to its teachings. The Baptist movement has always been rooted in freedom to move closer to God and Scripture; to change.

But the more established we became, the more institutional we became, the more vested in what we had and who we were, the less capacity we had to continue the journey. The more stuff we collected, the less mobile we became.

My friend Bill Wilson is the new president of the Center for Congregational Leadership at Baptist Hospital in Winston. He recently wrote an article about a question posed to him in another writer's blog. The question was, *what do you lie to yourself about?* Notice the question was not "do you lie to yourself?"

Several wrote in to this blog with "confessions" like the following, "*I lie to myself that I'm comfortable with my body.*" "*I tell myself that I have direction in life, but I don't.*" *My lie is that I'll be happier if I make more money.* One wrote, *I tell myself I don't have any prejudice.*

**These fabricated assertions are the way we cope with lives that are not changing;** not becoming; that are stuck in something too painful for us to admit. So we just tell ourselves we believe when we don't. We just tell ourselves we're better when we're not; that we're open when we're closed.

So what are the lies we tell ourselves? Lies like, the status quo is good if it's good for me. Lies like, God wants us to keep doing the same things the same ways because it worked for years. Lies like, the church's job is to make me feel better; or if I volunteer, I don't need to give tithes and offerings.

When it comes to change in the church, we must identify the burden of proof. Every congregation puts that burden on either the change agents or the tradition holders. If the burden of proof is on the change agents, they are responsible for convincing the church that change will edify the church. If the burden of proof is on the tradition holders, change is the norm and those who want to maintain traditions must convince the congregation that it would edify the church.

Every established congregation over one generation old typically puts the burden of proof on the change agents. In other words, these congregations will continue to do the same things unless there are some persistent and positive change agents.

Every congregation less than a generation old puts the burden of proof on tradition holders. Change will be a normal and frequent occurrence in these churches until they have formed new traditions they have come to value.

**Do you know which kind of congregation grows and which one declines?** We all do unless we're lying to ourselves.

This congregation is becoming more responsive and flexible in the hands of God. We are shifting from a congregation that is automatically skeptical of change to one that is more flexible, dynamic and open. **We aren't throwing the baby out with the bathwater but we are throwing out the bathwater.** I'm so very proud and hopeful that our fear of change is on the decline and that we are willing to be moved and changed by God.

I'm challenging myself and everyone else in this congregation to embrace change as the norm on the Christian journey, not the occasional exception. If we are going to fear something, let it be the status quo. Remember, Jesus didn't describe the church as a fortresses, but as an army marching against the principalities and powers of this age.

What are the changes we can believe in? How about the young person who is baptized as a symbol of new life? Can you believe in that change? What about new ministries that are started because one or two were touched by God? Can you believe in that change? We have new staff members and by all indications this is change we can believe in. We have several families who have committed to giving that have not expressed that before. This is the only place where change is not good. We need to be giving folding money.

And then there is last Sunday. In high definition 3D, we witnessed the fruit of our labors here at FBC. Our children and youth are changing from one degree of maturity to another. Their faith is not static, it's dynamic. This my friends is change we can really believe in.