

Prayer: Holy Spirit of God, take now the words of scripture and the words of interpretation and open our minds, make our hearts responsive to your love, and commit our wills to walking in holy service with Jesus Christ. Amen.

Is Change Possible?

Galatians 1:11-24

June 6, 2010

A woman purchased at a craft fair a needlework piece on which was stitched: “Prayer Changes Things.” When she got the piece home, she hung it over the fireplace in the family room.

Several days later she noticed that it wasn’t there. She asked her husband if he knew what happened to it.

He said, “I removed it.”

She was mystified and asked him, “Why? Don’t you believe that prayer changes things?”

He responded with, “Yes, I do. I believe prayer changes things. I just don’t happen to like change, and so I took it down.”¹

It’s true – some of us just don’t like change. And the primary thing we don’t like to change is ourselves. In fact, we wonder whether it’s even possible to change ourselves. We wonder if the basic nature of people can change? Can the cruel become kind, the vulgar become refined, or the coward courageous?

There’s no question that the biblical view is that people can change. And perhaps one of the greatest illustrations of just how much is the story of Paul. Paul was a bounty hunter – he made his living hunting down Christians and having them put in prison or killed. Paul went from being one of the most feared men by Christians to one of the most influential Christians ever. Paul was so zealous of his particular interpretation of the Jewish faith that he would not tolerate any conflicting views.

Now, people knew of Paul’s reputation – his early life as a Jew. The early Jewish sect of Christians had done as they had been instructed to by Jesus – they preached and taught about this new way of understanding salvation. They’d been so successful at sharing their new understanding about what faith involves that they upset a Pharisee and Sadducee or two or thousand. The Pharisees and Sadducees remember were groups whose fortunes rested on the old way – the way of the temple and the old law. And so, they began to use their power to put down this new movement. They sought ways to destroy this new church before it destroyed them.²

And, they became pretty good at finding and threatening the Christians. They used similar methods often used by great oppressors in history: they threatened their livelihood, their families, their very lives. One of the problems was: these early Christians were willing to lose it all – family, income, their very lives for the right to live by this new faith.

Now, they weren’t stupid folks, you understand. While they rarely denied their faith when confronted, they didn’t go around flaunting their new faith. That is, they didn’t fly banners from their porches or have crosses installed in their front yards. They went underground – held secret meetings and used secret symbols to share their faith. Some went to other communities – even other countries in attempts to safely continue to practice their faith.³

Saul, later our Paul, became an expert at hunting Christians down in those other communities and countries. Somehow, he was able to work his way inside the secret groups, take down names, and then visit families late at night and remove those he knew to be guilty of being Christian. He was good at what he did. He believed in what he did. That's what made him so good at it.

It was on one of his trips to an out of town place, Damascus, when Paul had his dramatic life-changing experience. While on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, God announced to Saul that he had something else in mind for him to do.

We could spend all kinds of time debating what happened – whether Paul really got hit by lightening or whether it was some kind of inner-flash. Let's just put it this way for now – whatever happened it left a deep impression on Paul – deep enough to cause him to change from a Christian-hater to a Christ-follower, but it took some time for the conversion to become fully integrated into the fabric of Paul's life which is what today's text attempts to summarize.

New teachings – new life – new hope – new direction – that is what the Gospel is all about. The promise is that we can be new persons. We can change. We can have new life in Christ. Of course, the change that might take place in us might not be as dramatic as the one that happened in Paul's life. Few of us will see a blinding light or will hear the actual voice of Christ as Paul did. We need to be mindful of that and not use the lack of such an experience as validation for not letting Christ work the changes he can nor deny the validity of another's experience because it is not the same as ours or as dramatic as some. The important thing to hear at this point is that we can change – change can happen in us – to us.

OK, suppose we accept the fact that it is possible to change, how do we go about it? How can we realize our dreams and remedy our defects? How can we be what we have never been before?

While this may not have been the first step in Paul's conversion, my sense is this is the first thing that needs to be present most of the time in order for change to take place, and that is, we have to want to change. There has to be enough dissatisfaction with our present reality to cause us to be willing to pay the price change will require. Over and over in dealing with the issues that surface in the lives of each one of us – emotional, psychological, attitudinal – I am reminded of the harsh reality that until a person is hurting enough to want help - to want to change - it is almost impossible to do anything for them.

In William Barclay's commentary on today's text he observes that in order for the change in Paul's life to be accomplished he did some things that would be helpful for all of us to keep in mind as we seek to design a way for us to change things in our lives – to change things about ourselves.

First, he comments on Paul's going to Arabia. Barclay believes Paul did this to be alone – to think through what was happening to him and to speak with God before he spoke to others. We all would benefit from allowing for some time away to think about what we want to happen and to give God some space to speak to us when we contemplate making changes in our lives as well.⁴

Then Barclay notes that the writer of Galatians commenting on Paul's returning to Damascus. That took a lot of courage on the part of Paul. Remember it was when Paul was on his way to Damascus to wipe out the church

there that God performed a divine-intervention. Going back to face those he had been preparing to destroy – those he hated and was about to offend – had to have been a bit of a challenge for Paul.

One of the hardest things for us to do, yet necessary when we are trying to make a change in our lives, is to return to the places of our temptation – to return to those we have wronged and bear witness to the fact that we have changed – that we are different. Barclay retells a famous poem by Kipling called *Mulholland's Vow*. Mulholland was a cattle-man on a ship. A storm broke out and in the storm the steers broke loose. Mulholland made a bargain with God that if God saved him from the plunging horns and hooves he would serve God from that time on.

Mulholland was saved and so when he returned to land he started to make plans to fulfill his part of the bargain. His assumption was that he would share his faith where no one knew him. God had other ideas. God shared with Mulholland that what he wanted him to do was for him to return to the cattle-boats and share with those who knew him before – those who knew him as he was. If we truly desire to change, than we have to go to the places where we were known before and confess the change in our lives.⁵

Barclay then comments on Paul's going to Jerusalem. There's no question that he had to have thought long and hard about doing that. There had to have been a sense that he was risking his life. His former friends, the Jews, were probably out to get him because he no longer saw things the way they saw them. He probably was regarded as an enemy – an outsider.

And his former victims, the Christians, probably weren't quite ready to pal around town with him either. They probably weren't quick to believe he was really a new person. They probably remembered for quite awhile the tricks he had used before to earn his way into their secret gatherings. Who could have blamed them if in the back of their minds they wondered for a long time whether this was just another ploy on the part of Paul to know who they were so that he could later turn them in. Paul knew he had to face his past and we need to remember that we can never really get away from our past by running away from it. We can only change, deal with our past, by facing it. For only then can we really defeat it.⁶

Finally, Barclay comments on the fact that Paul went to Syria and Cilicia which was where his hometown of Tarsus was and where he was raised. Tarsus was where he had gone to school – where he had learned things – where his boyhood friends were. We can only imagine what returning to that area would have been like for Paul. Those friends could have very easily regarded him as a crazy. There's a good chance they were angry at him – maybe even mocked him a bit. The change in Paul's life was so complete that he was ready to face whatever it took to enable for the change to be believed both by himself and by others.⁷

So, is change possible? Yes, but we must desire to change, we must make a plan and follow it, and then we must recognize that it's going to take more than our willpower to make it happen. It's going to take a power beyond ourselves – probably the same one that invaded Paul – and that is Jesus Christ himself. It's going to take us believing that God loves us and that there are no limits to how far God is willing to go to help us change and live our lives as one of his.

In 1954 Marcelle Maurette wrote the play *Anastasia*. It was about a Russian woman by the name of Anna Anderson. She claimed to be the long-lost daughter of the last emperor of Russia, Tsar Nicholas II, and his wife, Aleksandra.

The play rehearses the Russian tsars belief that their kingdom was imperishable only to be tossed aside at the turn of the last century. The Bolsheviks bloodied the land as they killed the emperor and his family.

It had long been rumored that Anastasia, the youngest Romanov, had somehow survived the slaughter. Several women had claimed to be her over the years. All were determined to be frauds.

Anna was a homeless, nameless, memory-less wanderer who often attempted suicide in the insane asylum where she lived. She had been named Anna because she didn't know what her name was.

Anna's doctors came across a picture of the last Russian royal family and believed she did indeed bear a striking resemblance. She was hypnotized and revealed much more than what they would have suspected about the Russian noble house. After much speculation about how it could be determined for certain whether she was a descendent of the family, the old empress, who had not been in Russia at the time of the murder of her son and his family, went to see Anna. After a lengthy conversation, the elderly woman announced to the world that Anna was indeed her granddaughter, Anastasia.

Well, Anna began to change – she took hold of her life – the suicide attempts ceased – she bathed and combed her hair – she stood up straighter – walked with a sense of dignity. The line in the play which carries the heart of the story is the one which Anna herself offered in response to the questions about how she was able to change. “You must understand that it never mattered whether or not I was a princess. It only matters that ... someone, if it be only one, has held out their arms to welcome me back from death!”⁸

Change is possible because God believes in us – the hands of God are constantly reaching out to us seeking us to be all we can be.

The act of Holy Communion is a symbol of how much God believes in us – it is an opportunity for us to get in touch with God's grace – it is God offering grace to us even when we may not deserve it – it is a proclamation of God's unconditional love. Let us prepare ourselves for the life-changing work this sacrament offers.

1. By William K. Quick in “Signs of Our Times: A Vision for the Church,” and submitted by Donald Brenneman in Circuit Rider.
2. John B. Jamison, “My Earlier Life,” Sermons for Sundays after Pentecost (First Third): God's Grammer (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc.).
3. Ibid.
4. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible: The Letters to The Galatians and Ephesians (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), p. 14.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 15.
7. Ibid., p. 15.
8. Wayne Brower & Schuyler Rhodes, “New,” www.sermonsuite.com.