

May 19, '19m Anthon UMC, Acts 11:1-18, "The Times They are a Changin"
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"Come gather round people wherever you roam." Yup, like Bob Dylan cryptically wrote back in the 60s, "The times they are a changin'" For better or worse, whether we like it or not, they just are. Our children grow up and we grow older and through it all we are to take heart for God who sees our future, promises us in the Book of Revelation that He has a plan to make everything new.

Well today we have our sights set on some new graduates from high school and college and maybe even some from a trade school, looking to the future, planning out how life is going to go...all new and shiny. Take a moment to remember some of those new and shiny times that came in your own live. Not really sure of where life is leading but going there anyway. There come junctures in every life when we turn a corner and to our surprise or to our distaste, things change. Things are about to change for all you graduates. The world never stops turning and you can't stop it, and on this day, we celebrate with you the excitement of what changes life will bring to you next.

Change can be scary for all of us, no matter what the age as we pitch into the unknown. Maybe that is why I have put off retiring twice and am not so keen on doing it for the third time. What if it's a mistake? What if I'm sorry I made this decision? What if there is nothing out there worth doing after having being a pastor? I feel kind of scared, scared I could be so bored I might go into a depression and just start watching soap operas all day long. Or worse yet, what if I have no more excuses to avoid cleaning out those closets after all these years? But what if... what if, there is something different out there God is calling me to do and I need to go through this change to make a space for it...change takes trust that God is still calling us to follow Him in all circumstances.

And our church...We're turning a corner here too. Why can't things just stay the same? We've been pretty comfortable, but will this change shove us out of our comfort zone? That's just life for you...it continues to change because it has to, because those of us taking part in this life, change, and it's time for some to step up and some to take a step further.

But what if this church doesn't care for being a 3-point charge? It sounds like a challenging new wave of change is coming, with a new woman pastor at the helm. But what if God has called her to this task to do a new thing and we miss it because we didn't embrace it? And what if this church finds this new voice to be uplifting in new ways? Pastors changing can be a good thing...and if not, in the UMC change comes pretty often in the pastoral leadership. Always remember, YOU in the pews and you doing the work, and you doing the worship, you are the church!

And what if...what if, those of you graduating from high school or college or other institutions of learning find that instead of that change being unknown untested ground, the next step in life will be a solid growth spurt in faith and independence you never had before? Doors are opening all the time in every situation, even if it comes as an unexpected and unplanned surprise, jolting our life in a new direction. Whatever the change, going forward is called walking in faith and we do not walk alone.

God in His mercy is willing to build something new even if moving on from the old sometimes is painful. Look at the fire damage in the Cathedral of Doter Dham which destroyed a great part of this 950-year-old structure. It took 200 years to build it in the first place, and it is a tragic loss, but since it's the most famous monument in Paris, towering over it all, and people are so emotionally attached to it, my guess is that God

will turn the hearts of the people to make it rise from the ashes like there never was a fire. And it's encouraging that marvelous miracles have been found from the destruction, such as the massive pipe organ which impossibly withstood the fire, and the priceless rose window made of 33 feet of stained glass with a spider web frame, did not crack. And how about Notre Dame' golden cross still shining in place afterward, and wonder of wonders the priceless marble statues of the apostles happened to be taken down from the roof to be cleaned and were actually spared by that strange timing.

And we remember it was just such a disaster for us when 30 years ago a fire destroyed our own beloved church building that stood on this very spot. Our own European made stained glass window of Jesus did crack, when we burned. But we glued it back together, reframed it as a centerpiece of our survival, and went on to rebuild this lovely handicap accessible dwelling of worship. Incredibly, if you hang on for dear life you can always depend upon the grace of God getting you through the scary changes of life in so many little and big unexpected ways. How could we survive in this changing world otherwise?

In our second reading for today, Peter found out God had some unexpected plans of change that turned the newly formed church's acceptable beliefs upside down. Peter is about to experience his own church fire. God is doing something new that will place Peter, the leader, at the center of a conflict with the early believers back home. Conflict in the church is nothing new, but this one was serious. The believers back in Jerusalem who did not see for themselves what new thing God was doing called Peter on the carpet for accepting the Gentiles, the heathens, the unclean, into their faith, baptizing them. Peter has preached to "those people" and lo and behold when they caught the

vision of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and wanted the water baptism. Peter was put in a place of change that would put him between a rock and a hard place. What to do? What to do? If you remember last Sunday after the resurrection of Tabitha, Peter stayed on to preach in Joppa, living with Simon the Tanner. Now remember Jews were not allowed to touch dead animals as they would be considered unclean for their rituals. Peter had put himself in jeopardy by living in this atmosphere. And now he was found to be eating and staying with these non-Jews, these uncircumcised infidels. That is just not done. It's against the Jewish law. It was forbidden. It wasn't that other Gentiles had not been converted before this and been water baptized and totally included in with the Jewish believers, but they had been circumcised. They had fit in with the Jewish laws and traditions. These were the uncircumcised unacceptable non-Jewish people of Europe and Asia Minor that Peter was sidling up to.

Peter was the leader of the new church, the solid Rock, and rocks don't change ... or do they? People expected Peter to show the way for the new church formed at Pentecost...and it had to be the Jewish way. People don't like change that threatens their established rules and way of life so the circumcised believers, the chosen people, the Jewish Christians, criticized Peter for sharing the good news with those people. Isn't that always the way? Where on earth do the uncircumcised fit in the Jewish Christian faith equation? Anyone who starts mixing with those who are considered unacceptable anything, opening the door to something new, will have a hard go for a while...maybe for a long while. Maybe forever. Something has to give. Something has to change.

And so, Peter was called to explain his behavior before the board back home. Scary. Can't you just hear them questioning him? "Is it true Peter that they eat pork and other things that are atrocity to the Lord? And is it true they don't worship in Synagogues, and that they don't keep the Sabbath holy and what they eat...dear God, Peter what are you thinking baptizing them in water, making them one with us?" What was Peter supposed to say, but "yes, yes and yes. Yes, it's all true." I guess he could have said, "Don't shoot me, I'm just the messenger, God did it!"

Appearing before boards is scary but they keep you accountable. Everyone who goes into ministry has to appear periodically before a board of pastors and chosen Lay people to answer questions about their faith beliefs, check out their beliefs, until the time their education is completed and they are deemed qualified to be ordained or consecrated to pastor others. Many appearing before the Board of Ordained Ministry express fear, but I kind of enjoyed it. One thing I was told that gave me calm was that if you can back your answer up biblically and by experience, they will respect it, even if they see the answer differently. We United Methodists have a large umbrella after all.

The Jews did not. Peter appearing before the board, not only brought in God's word, but Peter tried to explain this new thing, this change of rules to the board by telling them of a dream or a trance he'd experienced...a very strange dream in which he saw a sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of animals and birds lowered close to him. It was filled with those creatures considered unclean that were forbidden for Jews to eat. And what are the words of command Peter told them he heard from heaven? "Get up Peter; kill and eat." And Peter, even though he had come a long way in opening his mind to others who lived outside his proud Jewish heritage, Peter had been taught

since birth these things were unacceptable to eat, Peter assured the board that he argued with the voice stating that nothing unclean had ever entered his mouth. Peter was not easily letting go of everything he'd been taught. The voice of heaven argued back, "What God has called clean, you must not call profane." Say what?!? Peter must be a man that takes three times for just about anything to be made clear (remember Peter's denial of knowing Jesus 3 times and Jesus telling him to "feed my sheep" 3 times)? Peter told them that this sheet thing happened three times and then it was all over like the curtain of a theater being drawn back across the stage.

"Amazing Grace," this lesson of accepting Gentile things was for a reason. Peter explained, "The times they are a changin'." Gentile ways and Gentile people were being blessed with God's Spirit falling upon them too and they were repenting. If people unlike themselves are blessed with God's Spirit. what then are we do? Do we follow the law or the grace?

Peter went on to tell the board that following up on this revelation of God 3 men (count 'em 3) Gentiles came to Peter from Caesarea and the Spirit made it very clear that Peter was not to treat them any differently than he did his Jewish brothers and so Peter explained to the board how he'd listened and went with them along with 6 brothers in tow...twice as many brothers for witnesses as the three the Jewish law required to witness this new thing God was doing. When they reached Cesarean and Cornelius house (Cornelius was a devout man of God. He told the board that an angel had instructed the man of this house to go get Peter to tell them the message by which he and his entire household would be saved. And so, Peter told the board that he had gone there and spoke the words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And so the Holy Spirit,

who is empowered by the Word of God fell on these Gentiles also. What was Peter to do now that those unacceptable ones had accepted Jesus Christ and God's Spirit accepted them? He no choice but to receive them as brothers and baptize them. Good news for us! Now even the Gentiles of which we are a part, are included in the inner circle of the redeemed and that circle began increasing daily. These Gentles were hungry for God. Peter pleaded his case and theirs before the board.

The board was won over for what could they say and not come against God's Spirit...a thing you don't want to be found doing ever. Sometimes we have to run to catch up with God when changes come in any area of our lives, because change is scary. It took years before women could uncover their heads in church or speak in church and many more before they were allowed to preach and I can show you verses that Paul wrote to keep women from doing that. Right now the UMC is in deep turmoil about accepting social changes many feel God has forbidden.

I am not here to preach otherwise, but I do caution you to study and know what the Bible says, but also to walk in the law of love and acceptance of those who think differently than yourself and pray for the wisdom to know the difference. But just know that if God's Spirit embraces someone they are part of the body of Jesus Christ and if God is doing a new thing we need to have ears to listen. The times they are a changin'. But have faith, God saw the young church through the turmoil then and God will see the old church through it now.

