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“Reflections on 100 Years of Ministry”

Acts 2:27 – 37
Romans 12:1 – 2
Mark 8:34 – 38

Text: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” . . . Romans 12:2

Today I am beginning a sermon series that will take us to Lent. It is on a leadership principle called Adaptive Work or Adaptive Change. You may ask why I am doing this at a time when our church is celebrating 100 years of ministry. And that’s a fair question. And my answer is that the main constant in the 100 years of ministry we have experienced is change. You can see the change in Paul Weller’s history columns in the Highlights; and perhaps you have felt the change with every new program, every new minister, and I would argue, every new member.

The real question then before us is “How have we handled the change?” “Has external change forced us to change?” “Have we initiated changes to meet or even anticipate a changing congregation?” “Have we handled well unexpected changes?” And that’s where adaptive work becomes very important.

OK. So I haven’t been here 100 years – although some of you may feel that way. So rather than try to chronicle the 100 years I do want to introduce to us how adaptive work or adaptive change can be a wonderful resource to us. I would say that it is based on three biblical principles that are described in the Biblical texts for today:

As Bishop Susan Hassinger said in a sermon to the newly merged Upper New York Annual Conference, “We live in a time when the culture around us tries to mold us into putting self first, to embrace a culture of consumerism and individualism, to seek ease and financial security, to preserve the institution at all costs. But Jesus (in Mark’s passage), Peter (in the Acts passage), and Paul (in his letter to the church at Rome) are calling us to reconsider what success is all about, what is most important, and what the foundation for living the vision [of the church is all about].”

1.) From the Acts passage, on that first Pentecost day, Peter addressed the crowd. When Peter was finished the crowd asked people, “What should we do?” and Peter said, “Repent.”

To repent means to turn around and go in a different direction. While it is easier to follow the familiar path in which our culture leads, repentance means that we have not always followed God’s guidance; that we have desired to go our own ways, and that we need to change.

And our culture has undergone enormous changes since this church was founded 100 years ago. I can share with you parts of my musings that you will find in the current issue of Highlights, our Newsletter.

I was born in a time when my house burned coal for heat. We had no thermostat – that was regulated by the amount of coal shoveled into the furnace and the damper settings. Our family was a bit late in getting a TV. I was in the third grade when we got our 17 inch Philco black and white TV. Prior to that our neighbors, the Phillips, used to let me come over every Saturday at noon to see on their TV *The Big Top*, my favorite TV show – about the circus. Our phone had a party line – shared with the Phillips. If they were using it, we had to wait make our call until they were finished. In 1988 a parishioner gave me his Mac computer – for six months it was a cumbersome paper-weight on my desk. In 1995 I got my first “cell” phone – it was bolted to the console in my car.

A few of you are older than I and no doubt have several other examples of change in your life; and several of you are younger. But no matter your age, if you reflect back on your lives you will marvel at how much change there has been. Even those in our Youth Group can remember a time without I-Pads and **Facebook**.

While I have mentioned technology, becoming more mobile has also changed how our society operates. Studies now show that a person in their 20’s entering the workforce will have 7 – 8 different careers (not just jobs) before they stop working.

When I grew up only there were “Blue Laws” that prohibited stores from being open. Sunday was a sacred day. The Sundays of my childhood began with church at 9:00; church school at 9:45; and the second service at 10:45. Then home for a big Sunday dinner; play in the afternoon with neighborhood friends, then back to church at 6:00pm for Youth Group.

There wasn’t much to compete with this schedule – no youth soccer, no movie theaters open, all major stores closed. It was the heyday of church growth. Chevy Chase UMC observed it well; and the Rev. Dr. Richmond guided the church through the largest period of the church’s growth with both people and buildings.

Then in the 1960’s and beyond society began to change – very rapidly. Suddenly there were stores open, organized activities for children and youth were offered – even on Sunday mornings. Now the church faced stiff competition. And as we prepared to enter the 21st century the make-up of society also changed. People came to the United States from countries other than western Europe, many with different faiths! And the church found that in order to – not just compete, but even to survive – it had to change. As Bishop Schol said, “The church is now in a time of urgency because our present course is not capturing the hearts and minds and imaginations of large segments of our society.”

Well, back to repentance. Repentance means being willing to give up the known and the comfortable in order to gain that which is lasting and more significant. Our church, through its 100 year history has had many moments when it has had to take a

look at what it is doing, “give up the known and comfortable” so that its ministry might point its members in a direction that will help them “gain that which is lasting and more significant.” An example of this would include starting a PreSchool, and now having a Diversity Committee. It means following the vision of Christ that we might “seek ye first the Kingdom of God.”

2.) This moves us to the *Romans* passage that urges us not to conform “to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” In other words, “being transformed” means to have a vision. One of the first principles of Adaptive Change is that you need to know where you are going.

There is a telling piece of dialogue in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, between Alice and the Cheshire Cat.

“Cheshire Puss, . . . Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where –” Alice added as an explanation.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

One of the reasons I eagerly accepted the Bishop’s appointment to be pastor of this church was that in meeting with its key leaders, I discovered a deep hunger to develop a vision and mission. Without such a goal in mind a church can wander aimlessly; or worse, continue to do the same things over and over expecting different results. When this happens many churches then begin to be mirror reflections of the culture that surrounds them. In short – they have conformed. But we are called to be transformed and that can only happen when we have a Vision to “Journey Outside Ourselves” and a Mission “to serve and be served, heal and be healed, through God’s transforming love.”

I would suggest that in order for our vision to be fully embraced, we need to passionately love the God Who has so passionately loved us. Unless we know this, not just in our head, but in our whole being, that we are beloved children of God, it will be difficult to be transformed in a way that allows us to deny self and be transformed. As we experience that love from God, we will be empowered by the Spirit to move away from a focus on self and to move out to be God’s love with our neighbors in all places.

I am proud for this church for as I reflect on the ministry of our predecessors there has, for the most part, been a clear vision – from the very beginnings of forming a church – to growing a church – to the early mission years of being in mission **for** others – to our current vision of being in mission **with** others where we humble ourselves enough to know that we could well be healed or served by the very ones we are in mission with. But like knowing the love and grace of God with our whole being, we need to be united together on following our mission.

3.) In Mark’s passage we find Jesus telling us that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for My sake, and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.” As we begin to incorporate this thought in our lives a pattern begins to

emerge – a pattern that is not finished; but we see an outline and direction take shape. Now we begin to trust that something beautiful will come out of what we are doing. It is new to us because now we encounter many different kinds of people as we expand our definition of neighbor. No longer needing to focus on ourselves, we can give of ourselves to others. W. Paul Jones, in his book *The Art of Spiritual Direction*, includes this thought to ponder, “Since every person is a potential neighbor, there are no strangers.” The beauty we see will be refreshing and new because God is helping us “journey outside ourselves.” We are beginning to do this with the Citizenship Classes which begin in February. We do this with our Sister Church, we do this as we interact around the table with the homeless at St. Luke’s Shelter, and with those hungry at Our Lady of the Lourdes.

None of us knows for sure what the future of this church will be in 2112. But we can be fairly certain that it will not be like the church we know today, anymore than the expression of our church today resembles the formative church gatherings almost 100 years ago. We need to engage in this process of Adaptive Change as we listen to God’s Spirit nudging us along. Together we support one another in focusing on God’s vision – not what we want to do; but together we help others to listen to God’s voice, to be inviting and encouraging, even when life and ministry may seem to be discouraging.

We live in both changing times and exciting times; and to be in ministry we need to focus on the Vision given to us by God’s Spirit, assured that we do not do ministry on our own, but empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit.