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“Adaptive Change: Bridging the Gap”

Acts 10:1 – 22; 24 – 28; 34 – 35; 44 – 48

Acts 11:1 – 4a; 15 – 18

from Luke 4: 16 – 30 (within sermon)

Text: Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, . . .” . . . Acts 10:34

Last week I began a sermon series on Adaptive Change, one of several tools that churches and other institutions may use as they face an ever-changing world. Adaptive work is not necessarily easy; but it is as old as recorded history.

Today I would like to examine three examples of adaptive work. They come from Methodism’s founder John Wesley, the inauguration of Jesus ministry, and from the disciple Peter as the early church was formed. The unifying theme in all of these is that it is fundamentally important to remember what we are called to do and be. So it can be said that the task of adaptive work is to address the conflicts by bridging the gap between the values we hold and stand for and the reality we face. The reality we face is that our attendance has been on decline in this church for over 40 years, and in those 40 plus years our society has changed remarkably. Our values, according to the Great Commission is to go and be disciples in all nations, baptizing them. . . . Our Vision is to Journey Outside Ourselves. The signs above the entrances to our Sanctuary and Chapel, say “Servants Entrance.” Remembering our values and our Vision is critical.

1.) The first example is from the Journal of John Wesley occurred in 1739. The place was Bristol, England. The date was Saturday, March 31. Quoting the Journal of Methodism’s founder, John Wesley:

Saturday, March 31. In the evening I reached Bristol, and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (until very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church.

Monday, April 2. At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people. The Scripture on which I spoke was this, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

We have a remarkable example of how adaptive work happens. I hope you noticed the struggle in his Journal entries. On Saturday he writes, “I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, . . . having been all my life (until very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church.”

John was tenaciously holding on to doing things – in his mind – the “right” way. And then his close friend and remarkable preacher, George Whitefield helped Wesley understand that instead of doing things the right way; he ought to examine whether or not he was doing the right thing.

Even when he reflected on his first awkward and uncomfortable attempt at preaching outside he writes in his Journal: “At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, . . . to about three thousand people.”

What Wesley realized was that as important as being in a church was to him, he remembered the real vision of a Christian minister – which is to spread the Good News to all of God’s people. And in the early to mid-18th century England most of the people, especially the working class and poor, were not in the churches of the Church of England. To reach them, Wesley realized he had to go outside. Remembering our vision is one of the most important principles of adaptive work.

And if you follow the growth of Wesley’s movement in England and in the United States – you might say – “the rest is history!” Even historians site that Wesley’s willingness to preach to the masses where they were was one of the major contribution that kept England from experiencing the same kind of revolution that France endured.

And by the way, Wesley writes: “The Scripture on which I spoke was this:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

2.) Which is today’s second example of adaptive change. Those words, originally from the prophet Isaiah, were also the basis of the preaching Jesus did in his hometown of Nazareth as his first sermon.

It’s a familiar story. Jesus goes back to Nazareth, the hometown where He grew up as Joseph and Mary’s boy. He went to the Synagogue he most likely grew up in. They give him the task of reading the Scripture for the day, from the prophet Isaiah. He reads the words and sits down. And everyone speaks nicely of him. “Is not this Joseph and Mary’s son?” “I remember when he was learning the carpenter’s trade from his dad.” And all was well in Nazareth – that is until Jesus decides that he better expound on what He just read. So he tells them two stories of the two greatest prophets Elijah and Elisha – stories He probably learned from them in the local Nazareth Hebrew school – from the very people he was addressing.

The story is that Elijah, the greatest of all prophets, could have provided food for many people in Israel at a time when the area was going through a severe famine, “yet

Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon” (Lebanon). A Gentile, an outsider.

And for added emphasis Jesus tells the story of Elisha who at a time when there were many lepers in Israel, none of them were cleansed by Elisha. However, Elisha, the great Hebrew prophet who followed Elijah, healed Naaman – the commander of the Syrian Army, a Gentile and an enemy. Now the folks in Nazareth were upset; let’s listen in:

“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove Him out of the town, and led Him to the brow of a hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl Him off a cliff.”

Jesus ministry occurs at a time when Israel, under occupation by the Roman Empire, was hoping for a Messiah, a military leader that would restore the kind of dominance in the known world they remembered from King David’s era. They were trying to establish that they were God’s chosen people. And while Jesus never denies this, Jesus also – with these two stories, at the very outset of His ministry – reminds the Jewish people that God creates all people and all people are the chosen ones of God. And so Jesus went on to heal, teach and preach God’s Good News to everyone, and especially to those on the margins of society.

3.) So far we have seen that John Wesley, one steeped in high church religion, in order to fulfill Jesus Vision for his life found it necessary to be “more vile” in preaching outside in the fields, at the mines, and to the widows and orphans; and we saw how Jesus encouraged the established Jewish tradition to be more aware of the inclusiveness of God’s love to all. But perhaps the most telling example of adaptive change in the Bible is what happened in the 10th and 11th chapters of the Book of Acts. Without this story we would not be Christians today.

To set the scene, Peter, the disciple whom Jesus commissioned and said would be the rock on which the church would be based, is doing his best to help all the Jewish people to understand that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. And to this point in history there is very little evidence that there was a significant “Gentile” movement. But there were some Gentile or “unclean” believers. Cornelius was one of them and he was a Roman soldier, a Gentile stationed at Caesarea-by-the-Sea, a place many in this church visited last January. Listen to how one commentator describes the situation.

“Cornelius is a Roman centurion who leads a garrison of 100 soldiers within a cohort of 600. He is considered a devout man because he ‘feared God ... gave alms generously ... and prayed constantly to God.’ Certain non-Jews are called God-fearers in Acts because while they worship with Jews they are not yet converts to Judaism. Peter’s perspective as a religious Jew, the uncircumcised such as Cornelius are still “unclean” and a potential threat to his covenant relations with God and other pious Jews”¹

Well, Cornelius has a vision from an angel to invite Peter to his home. Even though he does not know who Peter is he sends some soldiers to give an invitation to

¹ The Discipleship Study Bible, New Revised Standard Edition, p, 1889 and 1890

Peter to visit in his home. Meanwhile, Peter, on the next day, totally without knowledge of what happened to Cornelius, has a dream in which he sees something like a large sheet coming down with all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds, then he heard a voice say, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” Peter, being a good Jew says, “By no means Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” Then this vision happened a second time and then a third time. Peter, we are told, was greatly puzzled about what to make of this vision.

And about that time the men sent by Cornelius show up and invite him to go to Cornelius house. While still trying to figure out what the vision meant and whether or not he should go to the house of a Gentile, he had another visit by the Spirit who told him to go to Cornelius house. Peter did. And when he arrived:

“Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. . . . All the prophets testify about Jesus that everyone who believe in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.’” (Acts 10:34-35, 43)

An amazing break through – but now Peter had to go to the Council of Churches – Jewish people, every last one of them – meeting in Jerusalem. I can imagine the snide remarks as word of his actions in Caesarea preceded him. “Umm Peter, is that spaghetti sauce on your robe. Wouldn’t be pork sausage in that spaghetti sauce would it?” Indeed their opening words were, “Why did you go to the uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

Can you imagine how difficult it would be for the Jewish Council meeting in Jerusalem to embrace the change Peter was presenting – welcoming the uncircumcised, eating with the unclean? Well, if you only read the New Testament, by the time this episode ends you would think all ended well, because the Council finally did embrace the adaptive change Peter was proposing.

“When they heard [Peter’s story], they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’” (Acts 11:18)

But since we know there are still Jewish synagogues and a major world religion known as Judaism, we also know that ultimately that Council meeting in Jerusalem either did not have a unanimous vote that day, or several Jews voted with their feet.

So there you have it – three examples of adaptive change from stories of our faith. They are stories of how to bridge the gap of where we are to where God’s vision is calling us to go. They are stories of struggle. Stories that bridge the gap between the reality we face and the values we hold. They are not easy stories, and you can be sure they weren’t met with unanimity! John Wesley felt he was being vile when he consented to preach outside a church. The folks in Nazareth wanted to push Jesus off a cliff. And the Council at Jerusalem ultimately led to having both a Christian faith and a Jewish faith.

But they are stories of being led by the values called forth by God's vision. A vision, that as modern day disciples we must embrace – a vision that calls us to spread God's Good News to all people; a vision that reminds us – over and over again – to “Journey Outside Ourselves” because the Spirit of God is upon us, anointing us to “to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”