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“Adaptive Change: The Sticking Point”

Exodus 16:1 – 3; 18:17 - 27

Matthew 13: 44 - 46

Texts: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you (Moses and Aaron) have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exodus 16:3)
“Again, the Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all he had and bought it.” (Mt. 16:45–46)

I grew up as one of those children you would see at most any church in the 1950’s – a child who was listing to the left from the weight of the attendance pins on her dress or his suit. Church to me meant taking a bath Saturday night, and on Sunday wearing my “church clothes.” They weren’t referred to as “my best clothes” or my “Dress clothes”, but as my “church clothes”; or occasionally as my “Sunday-go-to-meeting” clothes. It instilled in me a sense that only the best was good enough for God. Up until I came to this church, I would have never thought of preaching in anything but a suit or a robe and perhaps on occasion, a sport jacket. As most of you can tell – I have yet to lose the tie!

I am fortunate enough to be faced with situations as I go from church to church that require a degree of adaptive change. The churches I attend sometimes lead me in this endeavor; sometimes we forge our way forward together.

But that is not always the case. Sometimes we just simply resist change – refusing to acknowledge the change that swirls all around us. We want to go back to what we knew, we want to do only what we know how to do.

Most of us are somewhat familiar with the Exodus story. The Israelites found themselves as slaves to the Egyptian Pharaoh and sought a way to get out of bondage. Moses was called by God to bring about adaptive change. He led the Egyptians out of Egypt and into the wilderness. And all was good – for a little while; but the Israelites never figured on spending 40 years in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula where food and water would be scarce. And it wore on them. And oh how they complained. Let’s listen in to their complaining:

“If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

“If onlys.” How we would like to turn back the hands of time to the way we remember things used to be. “Egypt wasn’t so bad! We had fleshpots and could eat our fill of bread.” (By the way, in case you’re wondering what a fleshpot is – it is not the same that Anthony and Cleopatra might have had in mind – in this case it is cooking

utensils spoken of as a pots or pans or caldrons or basins that were probably usually made of bronze or earthenware.)

We all have our list of “if onlys.” And to some extent we all look back on the fond memories of what we used to do, or the way things used to be. But the truth is – we can’t go back! And if we did, it wouldn’t be the same anyway. The same people aren’t here now and we have selective memories forgetting the difficulties and hard times, only remembering the good.

So what do we do?

It all comes back to having direction and purpose. We need to remember what our Vision is. One translation of Proverbs 29:18 reads, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Gil Rendle, the former executive director of the Alban Institute, perhaps the premier institution to help struggling churches, said, “Without clarity of purpose we do not know what to give ourselves, so we settle for giving ourselves what we know.” Another way of saying that is instead of opening ourselves to what is before us we default to doing what we know instead of doing what is right.”

Moses kept the vision – and it wasn’t just to leave the oppression at the hand of the Pharaoh – it was to get to the land of milk and honey. But to the Israelites lost in the desert, all they seemed to be able to do was fall back on what they knew – and what they remembered. They knew they didn’t like the current living conditions with food and water scarce. What they remembered was having both the means to cook and an availability of food – and perhaps forgetting what it was like being in bondage to the Pharaoh.

And there is more to the Exodus lesson than just the murmuring about Moses leadership. In Exodus 18 we find Jethro, Moses father-in-law, giving Moses some much needed leadership advice. We find Moses acting as a judge for all the Israelites; and they came to him from morning to evening. Jethro carefully observes this then at the end of the day says, “Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?”

Moses responds from what he knows: “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God.” What a heavy burden of leadership! Moses, because he alone was given the statutes of God, sees himself as the only leader. Perhaps not bad in a very small church – but he is leading the whole Israelite Nation!

And so Jethro offers some sage advice – bluntly:

“What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. . . . You should also look for able ones among all the people, people who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such people over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they

will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.”

It was a turning point in Moses' leadership – to share responsibilities. And likewise it is why we elect church leaders each year; leaders who share the same vision and purpose that move us forward as we join in seeking to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is not unlike the parables found in Matthew's Gospel – the parables of the pearl and the treasure in the field. Listen again to the parables:

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

When we find the true prize – whether it be a pearl or a treasure, or in the case of our faith – the Realm of God's forgiving and accepting love, it becomes our central focus. We need to zero in and make sure that we have it!

Those who have had a seminal moment in turning to God and accepting Christ know what this is. Perhaps their life was once a wilderness for them – no direction, no focus. Maybe they remembered the old days; perhaps they even had no “good” old days to remember. But somehow when they remember – perhaps for the first time – what it was like to experience God's love and a subsequent call from God to go and share that love they are focused. They will do anything to keep that treasure, and their lives become oriented to doing that.

You have heard the expression, “keeping your eye on the prize.” The Israelites, caught up in the discomfort of the wilderness had lost sight of the goal to get to the Promised Land where milk and honey flowed. And too often in our churches, we lose sight of what happens when we forget that our task is not to do things that make us feel good – but to go and be disciples; to be servants; to lose our life so that we may find true life! We need to keep focused on how important it is to have God's accepting, forgiving love – and how even more important it is to share it!

A final word about the sticking point. Often churches and ministers get to a point because over time (years, maybe decades) where we gradually start to lose our laser sharp focus on the “treasure”, on “that great pearl;” the accepting and forgiving love of God. In other words, we gradually lose vision. Then we start to do what we know and we do the same things over and over, never questioning whether or not we are discerning the distinction between doing things right and if we are doing the right thing! Meanwhile we get stuck in our ruts while the world around us is constantly changing.

This church is no different. Betty Bullock, our church's archivist, provided me with the report of the Long Range Planning Task Force of 1977. Here is their concluding statement:

“ . . . we have a reasonably healthy, happy, complacent church and we are inclined to shut our eyes to where all trends are pointing. For the long range we must admit there is not one compensating optimistic trend.”

That is a sticking point – a church that had lost its vision, and had become comfortable doing what they knew how to do. When that happens instead of opening ourselves to what is before us we default to doing what we know – even if we do not like what we know. The antidote is to always keep focused on our vision and purpose.

This changing world is the adaptive challenge we face. It is not so much a problem to be solved, but it is the reality that compels us to learn new ways of thinking if we are to fulfill our mandate **to be** and **to call** disciples to Christ. Moses faced a new reality in the wilderness; people forgot both the misery of being in bondage and the treasure they were seeking to get to their homeland. The Israelites forgot both the past of bondage and the future to which they aspired. Moses' father-in-law Jethro pointed out an adaptive challenge and Moses learned a new way of shared leadership.

In the midst of the times we live may we remember why we are here – that as disciples of Jesus Christ our true focus is to spread God's Good News of forgiving and accepting love to all.