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Feb. 12, 2012

## ***Adaptive Change: “If It’s Out There, It’s In Here”***

Acts 7:51 – 8:1  
Acts 11:12 – 18

Text: When [the Council in Jerusalem] heard this, they were silenced. They praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”  
... Acts 11:18

My favorite sermon critic (who also happens to be my wife) gave me a lesson in Adaptive Change after hearing my sermon last week. Some of you may recall I made a reference to Dick Gregory. It was unabashedly an attempt to get a laugh out of the congregation. It fell flat. I couldn’t figure out why. I always knew Dick Gregory to be very funny, even if he was an African-American political, controversial, comedian of the 1960’s. Deb said, to me – “Probably either people never heard of Dick Gregory, or they were trying to remember who he was. Time to do some adaptive change, Dave. Update your jokes!”

So it is with a bit of trepidation that I share with you the inspiration for today’s sermon titles. I learned from Deb and last week’s sermon, I better bring a visual prop.

Perhaps some of you remember this (hold up old thick Yellow Pages Book). Back at 15 years ago and beyond – in the days before Google and other search engines; when you needed to get in touch with someone you could “let your fingers do the walking” and search in “The Yellow Pages.” And when it was not in use you could use it as a chair booster for any young children that might be in your house! In the 1980’s the Yellow Pages had some incredibly effective commercials. Let’s see one.

“Furniture Strippers” to David Rose’s “The Stripper”

(I always wondered how I could get David Rose’s “The Stripper” into a church service.)

Seriously though, from the moment I saw that commercial, I thought it would make a great slogan for the church! “If it’s out there, it’s in here.” And for an institution as cherished as the church, whose worship is often described as the most homogenous hour in America, to have and live out such a slogan would require adaptive change. Let me briefly explain.

Most of our churches, ours being a prime example, started generations ago. They grew out of a need in the community to provide a place of worship. When they were founded they reflected very accurately the make-up of the community. But over the years and the generations the makeup of the community changes; but the make-up of the church does not usually reflect the community make-up.

For example, in the mid-1900’s there were 4 very large Methodist churches in Newton, Massachusetts. The size of the congregation matched the size of the buildings. But in about a 40 year period, the community of Newton changed dramatically. It became predominantly Catholic and Jewish, and very much upper middle class. For a while those churches retained some of the membership that moved to the greater Boston suburbs, but by the time the late 1900’s arrived where there used to be four church UMC buildings there was

one United Methodist Church, a restaurant, two building sales, and a merger with a United Church of Christ.

The only truly “successful” surviving church is the merger to form the United Parish of Auburndale. Before it became too late, in the late 1970’s two churches of different denominations saw an adaptive challenge and made an adaptive change to merge into one.

You might be asking yourself, why has there been so much change to our churches, or in particular, to Chevy Chase UMC. A big part of the reason is that up until the mid-1960’s we lived in a **convergent culture**. What that means is that for the very vast majority of all people in the American culture, the questions asked **and the answers** were pretty much the same for everyone. We came out of time of a World War ending; we were in a time of relative stability, and slow but steady economic progress.

Take Sunday activity for example. In the years I grew up, the stores were closed, children’s athletics had yet to organize and become popular, and people didn’t have a lot of discretionary income to take weekend vacations, soooo we go to church!

The question wasn’t “What do you do on Sunday?”, but “which church do you attend on Sunday?”

The cultural norms were very much the same; people dressed alike, and for the most part dreamed the same dreams. Salary disparity was nowhere near what it is now, MacMansions had not become popular. We lived in a homogenous culture.

But a shift began, and this convergent culture began to develop into a divergent one. Not only were the answers to the questions different, the questions began to be different for different people. Sunday now isn’t even the proper day of worship for many people. There are many more options competing for people’s attention. The automatic default to Sunday worship is now gone.

Another reason for this is that there has developed a high distrust of institutions – for good reason:

- our political institutions – need I say anymore than pointing to the dysfunction of political elections and congressional ineffectiveness,
- economic institutions – the enormous disparity in salaries and a now shrinking middle class,
- and religious institutions - the loss of trust through the revelation of scandals in our churches

all those institutions are no longer perceived as the bastion of the common good. As a consequence now individualism, not institutionalism, reigns.

And to give you another example of the divergence of today’s culture, did you know that in the United States today 51% of the babies born have at least one parent from a foreign culture. And, in our own church, when the diversity team did a demographic study, it was quite revealing to find out how diverse our geographic area was within even a two mile radius of the church, let alone the 3 – 5 mile radius that our current congregation represents. And it is out of this cultural diversity that led the Diversity Team to begin a citizenship class,

What was out there when our Chevy Chase UMC was founded and grew, is no longer what is out there! And perhaps the most startlingly thing is many of us may not even be aware of what is out there!

It was not unlike what happened in the formation of the early Christian church in the generation or two after Jesus crucifixion and resurrection.

Any coincidence between our current situation and the adaptive challenge facing the early church is purely intentional! Adaptive challenges are not new! And studying the Book of the Acts of the Apostles gives us excellent examples of how to make adaptive changes.

Today's Scripture Lesson builds on the story of Peter and the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11 and moves it to include now the work of Paul and Barnabas throughout Asia Minor and beyond. Even though the church in Jerusalem had dealt with the same issue – how to welcome those who believed in Christ but weren't from the same religious heritage as the rest of the Jews – now it comes up again, this time a few years later.

Paul and Barnabas had been outside of the Israeli territories and were finding many people eager to believe in Christ. But they also faced serious opposition from many of the Jewish leaders because they did not observe cleanliness and dietary laws of the Jews, and also were not circumcised. They had many discussions when they returned to Jerusalem and decided to take it to the Council of Elders. This was at least the third time the Council had to deal with the body of Christ's apostles and followers: in Acts chapter five, Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, advised the Council:

***“Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these . . . .  
. . . let them alone; because if this plan is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of  
God, you will not be able to overthrow them – and in that case you may even be  
found fighting against God!”<sup>1</sup>***

And we have already referenced Peter's appearance in chapters 10 and 11 after he had a remarkable revelation about opening the church to Gentiles.

(Parenthetically I add that one of the realities of adaptive change is that when adaptive change is made, all do not agree, or agree at the same time.)

So now Paul and Barnabas are going through what Peter went through 4- 5 chapters ago; arguing the same position, with roughly the same people, again. Adaptive change sometimes comes slow.

But listen to the final conclusion from the Council in Jerusalem:

***And they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. Simon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for God's name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; . . . and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord – even all Gentiles over whom My Name has been called.***

And just for emphasis James continues what was written in the prophet Amos (9:11 – 12):

***“Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.”***

Adaptive challenges are not new. Even for the Acts of the Apostles and the Council in Jerusalem, they are reminded that the Lord was trying to open the church to all “from long ago!”

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 5:35, 38-39

“If it’s out there, it’s in here.”

I think God has been trying to get this message out to God’s people throughout all time. And if it’s not in here, the church needs to be making welcoming attempts to open its doors, its hearts and its minds to all who worship the Lord our God.

But as we go about addressing the challenges before us, we need to be careful about how we approach this. For adaptive challenges are not problems to be solved – people different from us, should not be seen as “problems”, but as people should be seen as brothers and sisters in Christ we have yet to learn from! Adaptive challenges are the current realities that compel us to learn new ways of thinking and being the church if we are to fulfill our Gospel mandate to go and be and make disciples of all the world.

Last summer the Bishop asked me to be on the new Visioning Task Force for the Annual Conference. We began our work meeting with Gil Rendle, one of the premier church consultants of our day. He began his presentation by asking us, “How many of you feel younger than you are?” Well remembering the adage that 60 is the new 50; most of us put up our hands. Then he said, “We answer that way because we know more about **who we were** than **who we are**.” And this is what we know about most of our churches – what we are doing is not working, but we are not sure where we are headed will work either.”

There is an old adage, “when you are up to your neck in alligators, you forget that you set out to drain the swamp.” Likewise, as we look out at the changing culture, we tend to forget that our calling is to welcome and make disciples – of all nations and peoples.

Sometimes we get so caught up in what we do as a church that we concentrate on doing things right instead of remembering to do the right thing! We forget that what God wants us to do is spread the Gospel, not keep locked inside our four walls doing only what we want to do!

The adaptive **challenge** is before us. Our culture is very different then when we’d first begun. But really, that’s not anything new. God’s people have been wrestling with who’s in and who’s out throughout Biblical history. And the adaptive change isn’t necessarily anything new. God, through the prophets, through Jesus who welcomed sinners and tax collectors and ate with them (the most unclean), and through the growth of the early Christian church, give us wonderful examples of how to be the church, practicing radical hospitality to all those who want to worship Christ.

As Peter concluded his speech to the elders in Jerusalem:

***“If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”<sup>2</sup>***

And the passage concludes:

***“When the Council heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’”<sup>3</sup>***

May we understand that as disciples of Christ perhaps a good motto for our church to aspire is:

“If it’s out there, it’s in here.”

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 11:17

<sup>3</sup> Acts 11:18