

NKPC August 14, 2016

Psalm 25: 1-7

In you, LORD my God, I put my trust. ² I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. ³ No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame, but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause. ⁴ Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. ⁵ Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. ⁶ Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. ⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good.

Luke 12:49-56

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”⁵⁴ He said to the crowd: “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. ⁵⁵ And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. ⁵⁶ Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?

Quick. How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? --

"Change!? What do you mean, change?!"

There must be something about our human nature that resists change. We get into our comfortable routines and when something is different, when something changes or goes wrong, when circumstances forces us out of the places where we know everything and where everything is predictable, into a place where everything is new and we don't necessarily know what to do or how to react; we tend to get angry, short tempered and frustrated. It is often not very pretty. This sort of thing happened to my in laws.

The La Barge's had a big Tudor style house in Holland Michigan on 24th and Central Ave that they had lived in for almost 40 years. The 1920's manor home was impressive and massive. It had 5 bedrooms, 4 bathrooms, a sun room, formal dining room, breakfast room, family room, greenhouse porch and a grand curved stairway in the foyer. There was even a second steep servants stairwell in the back off the kitchen, as well as a finished basement. And when the La Barges had their four children living there, the house echoed with their footsteps, friends and activities. For years, the La Barges filled the house with the smell of excellent cooking

and they frequently invited friends over for dinners or for homemade waffles for Sunday brunch. 12 or 14 people would gather and sit around their beautiful dining room table in high backed chairs and the lively conversation over superb food and wine would range from literature to music to politics to religion --all spiced up with sly puns that would set the whole group off in laughter. --It was a wonderful and good time. But things have a way of changing. The La Barge children all grew up and got married and moved out. They moved to different towns and even different states. The big 'ol house was no longer echoing with footsteps and activity. And while my in laws hated to admit it, and it took years for them to come to the decision, they finally decided that the big antique Tudor house that they loved, with it's old steam heat and it's one acre yard was just too much work and upkeep for just the two of them. So they decided to sell the house and to downsize to something smaller that had it's bedrooms on the main level. The decision to make such a change was hard, but the work of sorting through and getting rid of 40 years of stuff was even harder. There was much discussion and family furniture swapping that commenced. And many a beloved item or treasure was set aside or sold off with tears. But ultimately the massive antique home was sold, and my in laws downsized themselves into a house that wasn't designed and sized to be run by a

staff. The change was hard because that big ol house was part of their self identity. But the change was necessary, and it was going to happen sooner or later anyway.

Our scripture passage today is also about change. The change that Jesus is talking about here is the change that would be happening as Christianity took hold and made converts among the Jews. It was not going to be a nice easy conflict free change. You can just imagine the family fights that would occur . A son and daughter in law choosing to follow Jesus despite the religious stance of the parents of the household. A younger sister who also chose to follow the ways of Jesus despite being raised to be a faithful Jewish girl. --Jesus knew that the way of love of Christianity was going to take root in the cracks between the traditions and the laws of Judiasm and that the resulting growth in Christianity was going to be something that was going crack families apart. Just as sure as when we see the dark clouds coming in fast from the west over Lake Michigan and we know that we are about to get dumped on with a big thunderstorm, all the signs were there that Christianity was going to bring changes to many a Jewish family that were going to be very hard and difficult for people to deal with. -- Because being a Jew was much more all inclusive

than just going to the Temple on the Sabbath. Being a Jew determined what food you could eat, who you could be friends with, who you could touch and even on the Sabbath, how many steps you were allowed to take. With the new freedom of the love of Jesus, all of those hundreds of rules were about to be thrown out like 40 years of old water bills. The Spirit of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit that he was bringing to the world was a spirit of change and new beginnings. It was a spirit of love and discovery and redefining how it is that faithfulness was to be defined.

Over the centuries the church of Jesus Christ has been through several different times of redefinition. The earliest church looked very different than what we know as a church now. The early church were simply groups of believers that met together in people's homes. --They were not led by a professional paid pastor with a Master's of Divinity degree from an approved seminary. Instead everyone was a volunteer. There were no paid musicians or sound systems or church staff or parking lots. As Christian friends they brought food and they ate together, and they sharing the meal with those in the community who needed it. The early Church organized themselves to care for the poor in their community, especially the widows and the orphans who had no social security safety

net. They sang and prayed together and when they had a problem, they wrote a letter to Paul or one of the other apostles asking for their wisdom and help them to settle a dispute or to figure things out. While they were doing this, they were frequently captured and tortured and many were martyred for their faith in this new way of Jesus Christ.

This way of the early church continued until 313 AD when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official state religion. Suddenly, instead of Christians being persecuted, it was the popular and the politically expedient thing to do. Christianity joined forces with politics and the church often allowed itself to bent to become an instrument of the state. The Emperor himself funded several big theological council meetings of the church so that he and they could codify and choose the official positions of the church. With the blessing and influence of the government behind them, huge cathedrals were built to the glory of God. Instead of everyone being equal volunteers, individuals were selected to be priests and to be the leaders of the Catholic church which was organized in the same hierarchical structure of the Roman legions. The church continued in this partnership with the state until 1053 when the Eastern Orthodox church split off from the Roman Catholic church. The next big change was the

Protestant Reformation in 1517, which led to the birth of the Lutheran, the Presbyterian and other Protestant denominations that rejected the authority of the pope in Rome in order to better follow what they felt was the call of the Holy Spirit in that time and place. Next year we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant reformation. And church historians note that every 500 years or so the church has had a seismic shift where great changes have altered the way that we as a church operate. And more than one church analyst sees that the church is going through such a change now.

In the 1950's and even the 1960's, the culture of the United States could be described as a Christian culture. Sundays were kept free of school and other civic activities so that everyone to go to the church of their choice. Almost every store was closed on Sundays. My Dad described it as people "Rolling up the sidewalks", a hyperbole expression that everything that could be closed was closed and shuttered in order to allow people to have their God mandated day of rest. In addition to Sundays, communities and schools often also kept Wednesday evenings clear of activities so that parents could instead take their children to church activities. Everyone was expected to be a member of a church, and many

a business deal or even a political career was launched by folks networking with their church friends and fellow members. But in the last thirty years especially, our American culture has gone through a seismic shift.

Sundays are no longer off limits for stores to open their doors or for schools to schedule team practices or events. People are no longer expected to be a member of a church and the practice of going to church just because you are "supposed to" go has been falling by the wayside. It is no longer a cultural expectation. Today, the Christian culture in the United States is either dead or in intensive care, and the trend is that people who are still going to church are only those who are actually engaged and are growing spiritually in their love of Christ.

Because of this change of American culture, the church is faced with a new task of becoming relevant and for some this about as uncomfortable as moving out of a house that you have lived in for the last 50 years. Being the church in a non Christian culture is no longer as simple as organizing a new program, putting it in the newspaper and unlocking the church doors. Instead being the church today is all about building relationships. It is about making a difference to people who are hurting and broken with the love of Jesus. The changes that are occurring today in the church will

probably cause us to say good bye to some of our cherished practices and traditions, but if we are open to it, in their place will be new relationships, and new ways of practicing the love of Christ to each toward each other.

In conclusion, when Jesus was talking about the changes that were going to come to Judaism because of Christianity, he knew that was not going to be an easy transition for many people. Children and parents were going to battle and families were going to be split apart. But the fire of the Holy Spirit that led disciples in the first century is the same Holy Spirit that is leading us today. What is it that God is calling you to do? What sort of ministry has God lit in your heart that will not let you go? What is God calling this church to be in this time and place and in the culture that we are in now? In your bulletin you will find a slip of paper upon which you are invited to prayerfully write down those sparks of inspiration that God has kindled in you. Because there is one thing that is true about Christianity since the beginning that is still true today. God comes into our hearts and our mind and changes us. Our old lives are gone and we become new. May the God of love and peace bring us the change in our lives that the Holy Spirit is drawing us all toward. Amen.

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