

## **“Change is Difficult”**

**Sunday, July 17, 2016**

Good morning!

Well this is not something I really ever saw myself doing, and I have to admit that its given me a whole new appreciation for what pastors do every week. I expected to just sit down and my desk with paper and pen and write down what God dictated. Doesn't work that way I guess.

Its also not easy to follow Nick Kneebone up here.

I gave a good bit of thought to what I wanted to talk with you about today, and I decided to talk about something we are all familiar with - change.

Confuscious is reputed to have said that only the wisest and the stupidest of men never change.

Well I know I am not the wisest of men.

And I know I have worked my way through big changes in my life, so I hope that means that I am not the stupidest. I suspect most of you are somewhere in the middle with me.

Lets face it, if you have spent the last 3 or 4 years here at Black Forest Community Church, you are no stranger to change.

Most people do not really care for change. Not even a little. Because it seldom makes them feel good.

Suppose I were to say to you now – “I have an important announcement to make. Starting next Sunday, there are going to be BIG changes at Black Forest Community Church.”

Gives you a real warm, comfortable feeling, doesn't it? Makes you excited about next Sunday .... No.

People do not really care for change. We just aren't wired that way.

The economist John Kenneth Gallbraith once said that - “Faced with a clear choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone immediately gets busy working on the proof.”

Change isn't always bad, of course. If not for change we would all have names like Og and Gloog. We'd be hunting up dinner with sharpened sticks instead of credit cards. And family entertainment would be painting the walls of our cave with stick figures.

Change is also automatic. It happens. We can't stop it no matter who we are or who we know or how hard we try. Change happens anyway.

John F Kennedy said that “Change is the Law of Life. And those who look only to the past and the present are doomed to miss the future.” The Law of Life.

And yet ... there is nothing more human than hating change. Resisting it. Ignoring it. Denying it.

“If you want to make yourself some enemies, go and try to change something,” said Woodrow Wilson.

What is going on here? Why is this? Why, at such a deeply emotional level, do we hate so much to see things change?

Ron Edmunson, the pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington, KY .... and by the way.... the sign outside his church says “Everyone is welcome” just like ours does .... gives 4 reasons why change is so hard for most of us.

1. The outcome of a change is unknown. We just don't know what is going to happen to us! One of life's greatest fears is the fear of the unknown. It takes control away from us. Or the cherished illusion of control anyway. And predictability. Security. Doncha hate that? When you have to play a game and you aren't sure what the rules are? I do.
2. Change is challenging. It forces us out of our comfort zone. Its called our comfort zone because that is where we are comfortable. Change demands new responses from us, because the old ones just don't work any more. New ways of acting, thinking, being. That's uncomfortable.
3. Change is uncertain. We do not know, while we are in the middle of it, where change will leave us. Better off? Worse off? So we retreat to the familiar and cling to it tightly.
4. And change is unpopular. Change raises tensions. People under pressure do not always act their best. Animosity can surface. Intolerance. Gossip. Discord. Anger. Hard feelings. Blame.

You see, one way we human beings survive is by being able to predict how our environment will respond to our actions, and change disrupts that. When predictability disappears, so does our sense of safety and control.

This can trigger the same survival instincts as a physical threat. We may not be staring down a saber toothed tiger with a stick, but it sure can feel as though we are.

We say things we don't mean. We do things we don't intend. A whole community can break up into rival warring factions over change. We've seen it happen right here, right in our own church community.

In his book, “The Power of Habit”, author Charles Duhigg says that as much as 90% of everything we do every day we do out of habit. We just do it. Without making a choice. Without even thinking about what we are doing.

Now, this can be a huge help to us.

Imagine what life would be like if every time we ate we had to stop and think about how to chew our food. Or walk up the stairs or tie our shoes. Habits help us cope with busy lives.

At their root, habits are simply the repetition of a behaviour that works. But often circumstances change, and we continue right on with our habits even when they no longer work for us. Even when they become problems.

Its not easy to change a habit. If you think it is, try brushing your teeth with the hand you don't normally use.

According to psychologists, it takes about 70 days of conscious repetition to create a new habit. Or

break an old one. Two months. That's a lot of work. Another reason we don't like change. It's a lot of work. And we are busy enough already.

Now I'm not such a fool as to stand up here and tell you that all change is always for the good. But change often is. And it often masks opportunity. The problem is, we usually can't see that when it is happening to us.

I have had a lot of change in my life. And often, as terrible as it seemed to be in the moment, it turned out to be for the good.

About 30 years ago, my youngest brother was an Engineer in the Merchant Marine. He'd lived sort of a dicey life up to then. Brushes with the law. Problems with alcohol and drugs. But the Merchant Marine really seemed to turn him around. He was recently married, moving up in the ship's organization.

Then he got on a ship in Hamburg. And someplace between there and Boston he vanished. Just disappeared in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. There was an investigation, but never an answer. I was pretty bitter about it. It seemed just unfair.

It certainly was a change that I didn't like. I didn't lose my brother for no reason and with no explanation, of course. But mostly I didn't like it because I was forced by it to take a good look at myself and realize I didn't like what I saw. That I was not living the way I knew I ought to be, and I wasn't the person I was pretending to be. And life was uncertain. I had no reason to be arrogant. It led to a self-examination that really left me a very different person.

Would I have ever wished for that change? No. But I am a better man now because I had to go through it. Was forced to go through it.

A few years later, I moved out here to Colorado. I was working for what was then Digital Equipment, and pretty much expected to continue doing so till I comfortably retired.

Many of you may recall how Digital self-destructed in the early 1990s. They were laying people off left and right, and it was a depressing, miserable place to work. No one worked really. We just hid and passed rumors around and hoped to not get picked for the next layoff.

I had just built a house, my son was about 6 months old. And being without a paycheck was not really a part of my master plan. But, sure enough, that's what happened. And it happened TO me. I had nothing to say about it. Not a vote. Things changed for me.

Well it's a long story, but after being laid off, I started my own company. It was a real struggle for a while and there were times when I resented the struggle. It's not how things were supposed to have been. But I soon had 3 great partners, 15 employees and a growing, thriving company. It allowed me to visit 44 states and 19 countries, provide a good life for myself and my family, and do fun, challenging work, for 20 years. And even make a lot of money.

But here is the simple truth of it.

If I had been forced to decide on my own to quit my job at Digital and start that company it never would have happened. Never. I'd have been sitting in that miserable work environment for another 25 years. It happened only because a change - not of my choosing - forced me to do it. Because events and

other people MADE me change. Its not a stretch to say that, as miserable and frightening as it felt at the time, getting laid off was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

In retrospect.

And there is the thing. We can't see the outcome before we take the leap.

So then if we can't stop change, and we probably aren't going to like it very much, how do we deal with it when – not if – when it rears its ugly head in the middle of our orderly, under control lives?

Gary Bradt, a psychologist who specializes in helping people deal with change, suggests 3 things.

1. Acknowledge our feelings, and know that whatever we feel, its ok. Fear. Sadness. Blame. Frustration. Anger. Impatience. Emotions aren't good or bad, they just are. It is what we do with them that matters. Feel your feelings, and also acknowledge and validate the feelings of others affected by the same change. Nothing helps us like helping someone else. Even if they don't feel the same about it as you.
2. Understand that every unwanted change brings along with it a sense of loss and a strong desire to return to the way things were. The good old days, when everything was perfect. Its ok to mourn the loss. Its ok to miss what you lose. But you don't need a villan to blame. Don't let your loss hold you back from what you may have to gain.
3. Break big changes into little ones. Take steps, not leaps. Sure we have to change, but we don't have to do it by tomorrow.

Now these are all good things. Helpful things.

But you and I, as Christians, have a 4<sup>th</sup> tool on our belt that is far more powerful than any of these are, if we will only realize it is there, and decide use it.

And that is faith.

We can have faith that Jesus Christ is smarter, better informed, stronger, wiser and more loving than we are.

Faith that He has a plan for each and every one of us.

Faith that he would never abandon us in a time of need, or dump on us more than we can bear. I am sure Job felt That he'd been saddled with way more than his fair share. But he wasn't. And it was his faith and his trust and his loyalty to God that carried him through some pretty rough changes. And left him better off than he started.

Perhaps in our willfulness, or our arrogant need to feel in control of things, or our comfort with the way things are, or our unwillingness to have our habits and beliefs challenged, perhaps we need a little push to get usback on the path He intends for us to travel. Maybe a few of us need a good kick in the ass.

Maybe the outcome of a frightening change will be something great. Wouldn't that be nice!

Or maybe it will just be an opportunity to grow stronger in faith, or to prove that we really meant what we said when we professed ourselves Christian.

But we KNOW we can depend on Jesus to be at our side and to see us through. No matter what. That whole “valley of death” thing, right? Fearing no evil? Do we really mean it? Or do we just say it?

In Hebrews 13:8 Paul tells us that, “Jesus Christ is the same. Today, yesterday and forever.” However unsteady and unpredictable the present might look, we can depend on that.

My mother was a harried Irish housewife with 5 kids and a lot more mouth than money, and I can remember a prayer she would say to herself all the time when I was growing up. Most of you probably know it.

“Lord, please help me to remember that nothing will happen to me today that we can't handle together.”

So as we make our way through the changes that life IS going to set before us, let's all try to remember that God DOES have a plan for us, a plan for our church, and a plan for our community.

Let's remember, even as we struggle with our our challenges and shortcomings, to treat one another with kindness, respect, generosity and love. We're ALL imperfect Christians- there was only 1 perfect one - trying to do the best we can.

We cannot see where the next big change will take us. But we are not the enemy. Even change is not the enemy. The enemy is not having enough faith that God has a plan for us and that He knows what He is doing.

We cannot see where the next big change will take us. But we can heed the advice that God gave to Joshua during some very uncertain time of big change. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. I will strengthen you and I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous hand.” - Joshua 1:9

If that was good enough to help him take over for Moses, shoulder the responsibility of leading his people when everything seemed to be against them, and conquer a city, it's probably good enough for us now as well.

And just to be clear, there are no big changes happening next Sunday.

God bless you all. And thank you for welcoming me into your church family.