

## IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

Psalm 46; 2 Corinthians 5:17  
 A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham  
 The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York  
 Graduation Sunday                      June 14, 2020

The American psychologist Julian Jaynes once wrote about that “awkward moment at the top of a Ferris wheel when, having come up the inside curvature, where we are facing into a firm structure of confident girders, suddenly that structure disappears, and we are thrust out into the sky for the outward curve down.”<sup>1</sup> Some of our graduates may be feeling a bit that way in these post-graduation days. For some of you this summer will be both exhilarating and unsettling, the end of one journey laced with anticipation of another, as you ponder leaving home to find a new home in some university dorm. If so, for all the excitement, I know the coming weeks may be emotional days, too. You may not think so, but I know. I spent decades as a pastor in university churches. I watched such transitions every year, and I know that though these are days you have planned and prepared for – sometimes could hardly wait for – they still may tug at your heartstrings a bit, because you know things will not be the same from now on. Such new beginnings are major changes, and there is something within our very human fabric that resists change, even when it is part of our natural growth and development.

The American poet Richard Wilbur wrote, among his many poems, one called “Seed Leaves,” which employed the metaphor of a plant putting forth leaves to speak of change. In part, it said:

This plant would like to grow  
 And yet be embryo;  
 Increase, and yet escape  
 The doom of taking shape.<sup>2</sup>

“The doom of taking shape.” A powerful depiction of the frightening prospect of changes that attend our growing ... the awesome changes that confront us along the way to maturity.<sup>3</sup> They begin very early in our lives. No sooner have we begun to master the environment of our own crib than we may find ourselves displaced by the arrival of a new sibling, who usurps parental attention and affection (not to mention the crib).

Practiced at the home, comfortable at last with those we are coming to trust as our parents and siblings, we are dropped into the threatening realms of new faces and

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness*, <https://www.julianjaynes.org/resources/books/ooc/en/the-mind-of-the-iliad/>, accessed June 4, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wilbur, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1964.tb01249.x>, accessed June 1, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the early part of this sermon is drawn from Judith Viorst’s description of the processes of human growth and development in *Necessary Losses: The Loves, Illusions, Dependencies and Impossible Expectations That All of Us Have to Give Up in Order to Grow*, Simon and Schuster, 1986.

temperaments known as day care or nursery school... and though those realms be inhabited by loving and friendly people, the toddler's world is thrown into turmoil and change.

And then there's school, a new structure imposed upon one's days. I remember well our son cowering in his bed on the morning of what was supposed to be his fourth day of public kindergarten, as I tried to get him up and dressed. "Dad," he said, "I tried it. I didn't like it. I'm not going back."

Even if we do like it, and even if we begin to handle the increased responsibility of childhood, it seems only a few moments before we're "zapped by hormones" and tossed headlong into the unstoppable changes of adolescence, where all assumptions change. Judith Viorst reminds us that a normal adolescent isn't a normal adolescent if she/he acts normally.<sup>4</sup>

The changes begin to pick up their pace – leaving home for the first time, assuming responsibility for oneself and making one's own decisions (which we cannot wait for until the time comes, only to long then for someone else to lean on, or at least someone else to blame). Growing up... taking on responsibility... making decisions... living with the consequences. How are we going to live? By what values will we be governed? Whom shall we choose as friends... as a life partner? Choosing vocations... changing vocations... and what about children? Somewhere about there the cycle we thought we had finally survived begins all over again with our children, only differently now because *we're* the ones taking the child out of the crib, or off to nursery school, or out to get her driver's license. We're the ones whose children discover that parents are not only fallible, but wrong about virtually everything.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the nest is empty... and another blink, and we find ourselves aging. Subtle losses of memory. Diminished abilities. The deaths of cherished friends. Getting older.... oh, the changes there. Some years ago, a gerontologist offered advice to younger folks wanting to understand the effects of aging: "Put cotton in your ears and pebbles in your shoes. Pull on rubber gloves... Smear [some] Vaseline on your glasses, and there you have it: instant aging."<sup>5</sup> Only it isn't really funny; and the prospects of such change are unsettling for us all.

At every stage of our growing there are changes... changes that feel very much like losses, what Judith Viorst once described as "necessary losses" we need to accept in order to grow.

I still remember a line from *The Bridges of Madison County* – not one of my favorite films – part of a conversation between photographer Robert Kincaid and Iowa homemaker Francesca Johnson. Speaking of her children, she expresses anxiety for them, saying she worries a great deal about all the changes in the world. In response, Kincaid says something like, "If you think of change as one of the things you can always depend

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<sup>4</sup> Viorst, 150.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The View from 80*, cited by Viorst, 288.

on in life, then it becomes kind of like an old friend.” Well, maybe, but my guess is that for many folks big changes are not always that easy to embrace.

It feels to me that we are at one of those moments of great change right now as a people. It feels like what our Greek New Testament might call a *kairos* moment. We think of time as a certain chronology of hours and minutes and seconds, and that is time in one sense – what the Greeks called *kronos*. But the Greeks had another word for time, too – time in a deeper and more profound sense. The word they used for that kind of time was *kairos*, by which they meant an opportune moment, a time when conditions were right for the accomplishment of a crucial action. People of faith understood *kairos* as a time when God was about to act. These days feel like such a time in our national life – hopeful, perhaps, though it is uncertain which way things will turn.

We like stability. We like reassurance. We like something to hold onto when other supports seem to be giving way and the ground is shifting beneath us. We trust the familiar precisely because we know what to expect from it. In an era of accelerated change, we are apt to be more afraid of change than ever before.

And what scares us, I believe, is the thought that amid all these big changes, *we* might have to change, too, that we might find our old assumptions no longer tenable. We fear that we might have to relinquish our carefully construed frameworks of truth and right, that our attitudes and prejudices and conduct might come up for review and reassessment in a painful way. In the midst of all the other changes, we fear that *we* might be asked to change... yet again... after all the other changes we’ve dealt with in life. All our lives we have had to make accommodations to changing circumstances. And so, some of us may even get angry about new changes that benefit others, because they may cost us something.

It may be a bold and bullish facade folks erect when they speak their minds on resisting change, but what lies behind the brash talk, hidden away, and what haunts them, deep-down, is fear... the fear that once again change might ask something more of their souls. And so, some will say, pardon us, Lord, if we don’t embrace change. Forgive us if, when the apostle Paul says that in Christ we can be “new creations,” we don’t get terribly excited. Excuse our lack of enthusiasm when he proclaims, “Behold, the new has come.” Forgive us for reacting rather like the demon who sees Jesus for who he is and cries out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

We don’t like to say it... we try to hide it... but most of us don’t like change. We don’t like having to change. Even if we know deep down that change is the only faithful choice. And that’s where we may be as a people. Where we may be as recent graduates. Where we may be as a community of faith.

Might it surprise you if I said that the newness of which Paul speaks as part of what it means to be “in Christ” is not a requirement? That it is, instead, a fact? It’s true. It is simply a fact. Paul doesn’t say, “If anyone is in Christ, there *must* be a new creation.” He says there already is. It’s simply the fruit of what Hannah Faye last week

called being “made new by the radical and transformative love of Christ.” This word of Paul is not a threatening imperative. Like most of the New Testament, it is a gracious indicative... a gift of God. Paul says the newness has already begun once we take on the mind of Christ; he says from that point on we are more defined by who we’ll be than by who we have been. And that’s where you recent graduates are today, more defined by who you will be than by who you have been. That’s a bit scary, I know, because you have achieved so much to get to this point, and come the fall, many of you are going to have to prove yourselves all over again; but it is also exciting to think about.

A few verses earlier Paul said, when Christ died, all died. But that didn’t mean they were dead and finished. It meant they now enjoy a new kind of life...already. New Testament scholar Ernest Best explains:

Through his cross and resurrection, Christ has already created his followers anew. Paul does not mean that Christians have been given new ideals to live by or that they will experience a moral change brought about by a new desire to be good. [If that were so] they would be recreating themselves [and on their own would never muster the courage]. It is God who made the new creation as [God] made the first.... It took place in the death and resurrection of Christ. At that moment Christians became new people. That is the way God looks at them. They, for their part, still have to work this out in the actual way they think and behave, no longer living for themselves but for Christ [and for others]. In some this happens more quickly than in others, but it is taking place in all... Paul has something here for those who say pessimistically, “You cannot change human nature.” He [might] have agreed, but would have gone on to say, “But God can in Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

The old life has passed away; the new has come. Or, as Phillips Brooks said once, “Life is full of ends, but every end has a new beginning.” By God’s grace it is so. By God’s providence we are accompanied through all our changes.

We can face and even embrace change because the unchanging God gives us a “new creation,” and a new spirit to enable us to cope with all that life may throw at us. To reassure us that this is so, God calls us together into community with a company of folks who practice what it means to live as the “new creations” God has made them to be. It is hard to do alone, and that is why, for all its problems, we still need the church. And it’s why it is crucial to stay close to the church in days of change and re-formation.

Some years ago, my pastor friend Chandler Stokes said something wise about how Christians can approach change, a thought that I have since repeated many times, including with you. He said he had heard someone in a sermon “refer to the gospel as an anchor in one’s life and to God as a safe harbor.” That may be a helpful metaphor for some, he said, but “I ... would prefer to think of the gospel as a keel one sinks deep in the water and of God as the wind.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*, Interpretation Commentary, John Knox Press, 1987, pp. 54-55.

<sup>7</sup> Chandler Stokes, paper for the January 1998 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Memphis, Tennessee.

I'm not sure where that wind is blowing us all in these days. I know there's plenty of anxiety all around. There always is when change is in the air. But I also know the promise that God's grace will be sufficient for every need, and that in the end, we need not fear "the doom of taking shape." So, I would say to the graduates – and I would say to the church – trust the keel, sink it deep, and let's see where this holy wind takes us.

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea....  
The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.