

Change?!?
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Reflecting on Faith on Holy Hilarity Sunday
Romans 12:1-21

One day Groucho Marx was getting off an elevator and he happened to meet a pastor. The pastor came up to Marx, put out his hand and said, 'I want to thank you for all the joy you've put into the world.' Groucho shook hands and replied, 'Thank you, Reverend. I want to thank you for all the joy you've taken out of it.'

Church is a place where we wrestle with the hard questions of life, and consider how we are called into the struggle for justice. Hard questions and hard answers for the world is a complicated and sometimes despair filled place. And from time to time in our earthly lives, many of us have felt dead - from illness, depression, physical injuries, emotional wounds, the loss of loved ones, financial losses.

But church is also a place where we can come to rediscover joy. To find community and to live into the promises of resurrection. To remember that life is good and laughter abounds. We celebrate that joy today in Holy Hilarity Sunday, a medieval tradition often celebrated on the Sunday after Easter as a recognition of Jesus' triumph over death. I choose to put Holy Hilarity on the Sunday before Lent instead, to take a deep breath and fill up with joy before the solemn season of Lent. It is a little bit Carnival, a little bit Fat Tuesday, and a whole lot of thanksgiving for all that is good.

During our interim work together over the past 18 months we've looked a lot at change, which is not easy work. We've understood the need for change, that change is part of life in the world and in church, and that we too have to change in our understanding of ourselves, this community Pilgrim church, and Christianity in general. That work will continue as we move forward together and then in your ministry together with your settled pastor. But it's not easy to change old patterns and habits.

An Uber passenger tapped the driver on the shoulder to ask him a question. The driver screamed, lost control of the car, nearly hit a bus, went up on the footpath, and stopped inches from a shop window.

For a second, everything was quiet in the car. Then the driver said, "Look, buddy, don't ever do that again. You scared the living daylight out of me!"

The passenger apologized and said, "I didn't realize that a little tap would scare you so much."

The driver replied, "Sorry, it's not really your fault. Today is my first day as an Uber driver — I've been driving a hearse for the last 25 years."

Change can be difficult, especially in the church where we speak of an Eternal and Unchanging God, speak about a faith tradition that is 2,000 years old, yet strive to interpret that faith in new ways. We also have to learn new ways of being church. And, you know, change does not always have the desired effect.

The children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large tray of apples. A nun wrote a note and taped it to the apple tray: "Take only ONE. God is watching."

At the other end of the lunch line was a large tray of chocolate chip cookies. A girl wrote a note, which she put next to the tray of cookies, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples."

Yes, sometimes we spend too much time focused on the apples....

Change is hard. It requires us to look into ourselves. To be honest about who we are and how we treat one another. Sometimes we get so focused on those of us in here, how we think, how we expect things to be, the "right" way to do things, that we can't see things any other way. Sometimes that does not serve us well especially in relating to new people, new ideas, new ways of being.

"I'm a Yankees fan," a first grade teacher explains to her class.

"Who likes the Yankees?" Everyone raises a hand except one little girl.

"Janie," the teacher says, surprised. "Why didn't you raise your hand?"

"I'm not a Yankees fan."

"Well, if you are not a Yankees fan, then what team do you like?"

"The Red Sox," Janie answers.

"Why in the world are you a Red Sox fan?"

"Because my mom and dad are Red Sox fans."

"That's no reason to be a Red Sox fan," the teacher replies, annoyed.

"You don't always have to be just like your parents. What if your mom and dad were morons?"

"What would you be then?"

"A Yankees fan."

Yes, yes. A good New England joke. Perhaps it wouldn't have been so funny if the butt of the joke was the teacher who was a Red Sox fan, hmmm.

From Paul to the Romanas. "So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't."

Because sometimes we see change as a problem caused by other people. Or perhaps that it is those "other people" who need to change to be like us.

Three churches in a local town pooled their efforts to sponsor a revival. After the revival, members from the three churches gathered to compare notes.

"Our church did very well in the revival," the first noted. "We gained four new members!"

"We did even better," said the second. "Our church gained six new members."

"We were very pleased too," said the third. "We lost our ten most troublesome members."

Ah and ouch. I chose this joke with Pilgrim in mind. You see sometimes we think changes can occur by getting rid of people rather than tackling the much harder problems of how the systems work in our churches. We think conflict will go away by getting rid of participants in the conflict, rather than understanding how we can face conflict and find resolution and treat one another with dignity and respect.

That no one has to leave for us to move forward and to discover ways to change and ways to preserve what we think most of value. This is something we have looked at with our timeline, and talked about in Council, and have been honest about in our Profile. And will work to lay to rest as we get ready to do a new thing together.

Change is not lodged in particular people, in certain parishioners, in disruptive behavior. Change lives in the intersection of members and societal realities, in the distance between who we are and where God is calling us to go. We must "love from the center of who we are."

We need to be patient with each other, with our own selves, with the movement of change in our church. (as long as we are moving.)

A young man decided life would be more fun if he had a pet. So he went to the pet store and decided he wanted to buy an unusual pet. After some discussion, he finally bought a talking centipede, (100-legged bug), which came in a little white box to use for his house.

He took the box back home, found a good spot for the box, and decided he would start off by taking his new pet to church with him. So he asked the centipede in the box, "Would you like to go to church with me today? We will have a good time." But there was no answer from his new pet. This bothered him a bit, but he waited a few minutes and then asked again, "How about going to church with me and receive blessings?" But again, there was no answer from his new friend and pet. So he waited a few minutes more, thinking about the situation.

The guy decided to invite the centipede one last time. This time he put his face up against the centipede's house and shouted, "Hey, in there! Would you like to go to church with me and learn about God?" This time, a little voice came out of the box, "I heard you the first time! I'm putting on my shoes!"

Sometimes with change we need to put on our shoes first. Like understanding our history, working on a timeline, talking to our neighbors in Lexington and beyond. Like look at our church membership rolls and asking folks whether they'd like to remain members. Looking at the UCC and understanding why we are in covenant with our denomination. Like wrestling with Who are We and How is God Calling Us?

We are putting on our shoes as we get ready for change. And yes, changing while we do it as well.

New people, new ideas, a new world where Christianity is not the "in" thing to do on Sunday morning, or any other time of the week frankly, challenge us in our ways of thinking. We are called to think differently. Creatively.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was astonished that the hungry lions had not eaten Daniel as they had eaten so many others thrown into the lion's den. He summoned Daniel and promised him that if he would reveal his secret, the king would give him his freedom.

"It was easy, your excellency," Daniel said. "I went around and whispered in each lion's ear — 'After dinner, there will be speeches.'"

Not speeches!! We need to understand how our traditions and even the commandments of our faith speak in new ways and to new generations.

After explaining the commandment to honor your father and mother, a Sunday School teacher asked her class if there was a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters.

One boy immediately answered, "Thou shalt not kill."

We know there are other churches that promise if one faithfully gives money to the church, one will get rich. We know there are other churches that scare people by telling them if they don't repent and get saved they will be damned. We know that society promises people happiness if they buy a lot, have hundreds of social media friends, and are successful in their work.

But we stand in a different place on the theological spectrum. As Paul writes, "Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."

We stand for extravagant welcome, for a God who believes all people have worth as they are, for a partnership between God and people in changing the world and changing ourselves.

A teacher was testing the children in her Sunday school class to see if they understood the concept of getting to heaven.

She asked them, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into Heaven?" "NO!" the children answered.

"If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven?" Again, the answer was, "NO!"

Now she was smiling. Hey, they're getting it, she thought! "Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children, and loved my husband, would that get me into Heaven?" she asked. Again, they all answered, "NO!"

She was just bursting with pride for them. "Well," she continued, "then how can I get into Heaven?"

A five-year-old boy shouted out, "YOU GOTTA BE DEAD."

Yes, well, there is that. But even in death we believe in new life. In resurrection. In a change in perspective that has been revolutionary through centuries. For if we believe in a God of resurrection and presence, in a Jesus who walks with us, in the Spirit that lives inside us, what do we need to fear? Ultimately, in the most profound sense, we will be ok. No matter what. Which gives us permission, freedom, to risk change, big changes in fact. For ultimately, there is no way we can fail. God will always be present. In life and in death.

A man appeared before St. Peter at the pearly gates. "Have you ever done anything of particular merit?" St. Peter asked.

"Well," the man said, "once I came upon a gang of bikers who were threatening a young woman. I approached the largest and most heavily tattooed biker and smacked him on the head, kicked over his bike, ripped out his nose ring, and threw it on the ground. 'Now leave her alone!' I yelled."

St. Peter was impressed: "When did this happen?"

"Just a couple of minutes ago."

One of the best lines I read in preparation for this sermon thinking about change said this: We occasionally stumble over the truth but most of us pick ourselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.

We do stumble over the truth. But in stumbling and picking ourselves back up, we can choose to take a moment and think about change. Stumbling hurts. We know that. It was hard when your previous pastor left amidst conflict.

But in learning the truth about ourselves as a congregation, the hard truths and the blessings, we move toward change. Toward love. Toward wholeness. Toward openness. Toward grace.

“Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they’re happy; share tears when they’re down. Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody. Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody. Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. “I’ll do the judging,” says God. “I’ll take care of it.”

Whew. Just reading that I feel like I can take a deep breath. Paul makes it seem doable. I, too, can change. To the good, toward God.

I am inspired by this parishioner.

During her sermon on Jesus’s teaching that we should love our enemies, Pastor Sue asked the congregation to raise their hands if they had enemies. Everyone did so except for Mrs. Watson in the front row, who had just turned 105.

“Mrs. Watson,” the pastor asked, “how could you possibly live for 105 years and have no enemies?”

“That’s easy,” the senior citizen replied, “I just outlived the sons of guns!”

Well, I’m thinking I’m probably not going to make 105, so I better get to work on change. Changing myself. Changing the world. Changing how I think about church and what it can mean to be a community of faith in this time and place. Change. Lent is a good time to think about change. That can wait until Wednesday.

Just know that change is always unpredictable

The hospital nurse was filling out the paperwork to admit an 87-year-old Lutheran churchgoer who had taken ill.

“Has your diet changed?” she asked.

“Yes,” the woman said. “For Lent, I gave up whipped cream on my Jell-O, hard candy, and my two beers a night.” She paused, then added with a sigh, “And look where it’s gotten me!”

Amen.