

Sermon: 'Being Changed'

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We blithely say things in church like, 'Change my heart o God'. We talk often about repentance and renewal. As though change was an easy thing.

The truth is perhaps better expressed in the old sayings, 'A leopard can't change his spots', or 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks.'

The truth is that none of us like change, on the whole, and human systems are set up primarily to resist change, to preserve what used to be normal. I'd hazard a guess that all human beings are conservatives.

Even my flexible up-with-the-play 14 year old, who you'd think, if anyone, could embrace change easily, complained to me this week that, even after a whole month at his new school, he still finds himself mentally working out of the timetable at his old school & struggling to remember where he is supposed to be when. And my 16-year-old, Aaron, is still getting laughed at for calling his Digital Technology class 'DIT' instead of 'DigiTech'. Get it right, Aaron!

If teenagers can't manage small changes like that what hope is there for us oldies who are far more set in our ways!?

I asked you a couple of weeks ago what was something you enjoy doing and something you hate doing ... for me high on my list of 'really do not like' is adapting to new technology. And the blasted stuff keeps changing, because unless they bring out new stuff and new operating systems and new looks then who is going to buy new stuff!?

The thing about change is that we are generally quite clear about how we would like other people to change, but far less clear about what we would like to change about ourselves, and even if we know how we want to be different, it is astonishingly hard to actually change ourselves.

This morning I have 3 points to make about Change:

1. Change is not always for the better. Clearly the youngest son, his family, and his whole community would have been far better off if he had stayed at home, taken up his responsibilities and worked for the

good of the whole rather than satisfying his own selfish fantasies. This parable is so relevant in Western society today, where 'following your dream' is elevated to a national religion. 'If it feels good do it'. 'Be who you are and don't give a monkey's what anyone else thinks', to quote Mike Hoskings. Didn't work out so well in this story.

The church finds itself in the role of fighting to protect social structures and norms from the past, and this is both really important but also really problematic ... case in point, most obviously, gay marriage. Is a social change good, or bad, or something we can adapt to? Mostly, for a host of different reasons, we Christians reach different answers. I guess it's always been that way in the church, but these days, with such rapid social change, it has become a big problem for us.

2. People generally change because their environment changes. The younger son had been determined to never go back home, but when he was starving in a pig trough he changed his mind.

The older son is confronted by a major change in his world when his brother comes home, and he clearly does not welcome this. The story ends with the question, the cliff-hanger ending ... how will the elder brother change? There's no going back to how things were before.

One of the basic principles of marriage therapy is that you cannot change someone else, least of all your spouse.

One of my friends re-wrote the serenity prayer for couple counseling:

*Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the ONE I can,  
and the wisdom to know that that one is ME.*

Instead, we try to persuade our kids or our spouses to change their habits or styles of communication or whatever ... "Please do this differently" we ask. "If you loved me you would ..." Ouch. Or we try bullying or bossing them "You must change or else!!"

The problem is, none of this works. People do not change their ideas or their behaviours just because someone else asks them to. It just doesn't work.

People generally only change because their environment changes. I can only change **me**, and by changing what I do and say, that changes the environment of my home, which hopefully increases the odds that the people I live with will do what I want them to.

3. Deep change only happens in us when we know ourselves unconditionally loved. The younger son meets his father and begins on his pre-rehearsed plea for a job, but the father interrupts him mid-speech and just loves him, and the job application falls away leaving the young man with nothing left to say. That is the moment of true change in this story – not the decision in the pigpen, that was just desperation and more self-centred strategizing. This moment, as a robe is laid over his shoulders and his father is embracing him, as he just stands there, that moment is when this young man changes.

The experience of being fully accepted, loved, delighted in, this is a place of absolute safety, in which we can shrug off convictions, and in which we can imagine ourselves as different people.

This is what Paul is describing when he writes, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ"

The reason that we say confession each week and hear again words of acceptance and forgiveness is that we are deliberately putting ourselves into that place, week after week. We take our courage in our hands and choose to let God change us.

To go back to marriage therapy, a turning point in couple counseling is when a husband or wife is able to accept his or her spouse in a more full way, to say – 'yes I'm angry with you, yes you stuffed up, but actually my love for you is stronger than any of that'. And what happens then is that the other person is far more likely to change than any amount of nagging or manipulation or pleading. Our intimate relationships are always constructed out of this tension between accepting other people as they are and really, actually wanting them to be different so that our own needs are better met in that relationship.

The central moment in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is the paradox that we change when we are accepted, we are made new through love more than by any other force.

And so as we come this morning around the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, I invite you to come as the younger son did, full of your own needs and strategies and requests, but in the stillness imagine the arms of the Father wrapping you around. Let all your words fall away into silence. As you receive the bread and the cup imagine the Father's robe being placed around your shoulders and his ring on your finger. May these small symbols of Christ's body and blood bring you into the celebration feast of the Father who is overcome with joy that his beloved child has come home.

Do not receive this love lightly, but come knowing that this will change you. As Paul writes, as you are yourself reconciled to God, you become agents of reconciliation in a broken world. You whose sins are forgiven become 'the righteousness of God' for others.

As we prepare for Communion we give our offering, as a sign that we bring all of ourselves, all we have and are, into this place, to be reconciled and available to God.

I'm going to sing for you one of my songs, 'Let all creation sing'