

# Facing Change and Taking Risks

Luke 9:57-62 (Genesis 19:15-17, 24-26)  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
November 7, 2010

Today is what we call Commitment Sunday. It's the week that follows Stewardship Sunday, where last week I hopefully preached such an inspiring and moving sermon that you brought your Pledge Card back this Sunday promising a vast percentage of your time, talents, and financial resources to help support the work and ministry of this congregation through next year.

In all seriousness, **since none of us know what the future will bring, pledging is actually a profound act of faith. It involves a substantial element of trust** – trust that we will wisely use the resources you provide to help support and expand the programs and ministry efforts that we feel led by God to participate in during the coming year. I want you all to know that this is something that I, and the Session, certainly don't take for granted.

**So what do you suppose next year will bring? What kind of change is on the horizon?** None of us, of course, really know. For some people, change leads to feelings of fear and anxiety, or even anger. For others, it brings a sense of hope and comfort. When it comes to change, sometimes we choose it and work to make it happen. At other times, change is forced upon us, whether we want it to come or not. This morning I'm going to talk about facing change and taking risks, as I'm sure you could already tell by the sermon title.

**Let's face it – change happens! And just as not all change is good, neither is all change bad. Sometimes it's just change.** One of my favorite verses of scripture is Isaiah 43:19, "Thus says the Lord...I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it?" Now that's change I can believe in. In a sermon earlier this year on this topic of change, I included the following quote from the brilliant 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, **Paul Tillich**. In his 1955 book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, he writes, "The first thing about the new is that we cannot force it and cannot calculate it. All we can do is to be ready for it."

I encourage you to believe the ancient prophet: God is indeed doing a new thing - in your life, in my life, and in the life of this congregation, including in our Hispanic ministry efforts.

To which I need to announce something very important that has come up just since last week. **We learned last Saturday that the leader of our Hispanic Immigrant Fellowship, Ricardo Chavez, will be leaving to head back to Mexico in the middle of December.** That is both shocking and devastating news to us, and especially to our Hispanic members and friends of this congregation. But we know that with the inevitability of change, and God's presence, we are seeking to be ready for when that change comes. Last Sunday, in fact, there was a candidate here at the church, speaking with the Hispanic group and those on the Hispanic Steering Committee that we are all very excited about. But presbytery is now much more involved since our group is now designated as an **Immigrant Fellowship**, which is somewhat like a new church development on behalf of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, and not just a ministry

and mission that we are doing here within this congregation. So presbytery has been alerted and they are already mobilized – to work hard and *quickly*, which often doesn't happen in the Presbyterian Church, to seek and secure a new leader for a very, very important ministry in this presbytery. **So let's all be in continued prayer as we all go through this particular change that lies ahead.**

We must, therefore, keep our eyes and ears and hearts and minds open – so that we may indeed perceive those new things, and prepare ourselves to be ready for them when they come! But there is still the issue of learning how to cope with change. Robert Maynard Hutchins, while president of the University of Chicago, was once asked, "If you could have your students leave this great institution after four years with but one lesson firmly planted in their minds, what would it be?" Without a moment's hesitation he replied, "I'd teach them to cope with change, which is inevitable."

**Change – we may not like it, but we best learn how to cope effectively with it in order to function to the best of our ability, and to be able to follow where we discern God is leading.** The more I read and study the Bible, the more I believe that **change is an intentional part of the very fabric of God's good creation.** One coping mechanism then, is to accept not only the inevitability of change, but also to look for the promise that it brings.

I have a favorite story about change that I've shared over the years, especially with elders on the session. It's about a lobster and God. En español, La Langosta y Dios.

Long ago, when the world was very new there was a certain lobster who determined that the Creator had made a mistake. So it set up an appointment to discuss the matter.

"With all due respect," said the lobster, "I wish to complain about the way you designed my shell. You see I just get used to one outer casing, when I've got to shed it for another. Very inconvenient and rather a waste of time."

To which the Creator replied, "I see. But do you realize that it is the giving up of one shell that allows you to grow into another?"

"But I like myself just the way I am," the lobster said.

"Very well," smiled the Creator. "Since your mind is made up, from now on, your shell will not change...and you may go about your business just as you are right now."

At first, the lobster was very content wearing the same old shell. But as time passed, it found that its once light and comfortable shell was becoming quite heavy and tight. After a while, in fact, the shell became so cumbersome that the lobster couldn't feel anything at all outside itself. As a result, it was constantly bumping into others. Finally, it got to the point where it could hardly even breathe. So, with great effort, it went back to the Creator.

"With all due respect," the lobster sighed, "contrary to what you promised, my shell has not remained the same. It keeps shrinking!"

"Not at all," smiled the Creator. "Your shell may have gotten a little thicker with age, but it has remained the same size. What's happened is that you have

changed – inside, beneath your shell. You see, everything changes...continuously. No one remains the same. That's the way I've designed things. And the wisest choice is to shed your old shell as you grow."

"I see," said the lobster, "but you must admit it is occasionally inconvenient, a bit uncomfortable, and even risky."

"Yes," said the Creator, "but remember, all growth carries with it both the possibility of discomfort and risk...but also the potential of great joy, as you discover new parts of yourself. After all, you can't have one without the other."

"That's very sensible," said the lobster.

"If you'd like," offered the Creator, "I'll tell you something more." "Please do," encouraged the lobster.

"When you let go of your shell and choose to grow," said the Creator, "you build new strength within yourself. And in that strength, you'll find new capacity to love yourself...to love those around you...and to love life itself. That is my plan for each of you."

(The Synod of the Northeast, 1981)

Perhaps that is God's plan for us as well. So let me ask you: **What are the current "shells" encasing your life, and the life of this congregation – holding us back, confining our growth – that need to be shed in order to grow into another one?** To help with that, earlier this year we formed a new Visioning Ministry Team to work with the other ministry teams and the congregation in the process of long-range planning. Their work is just beginning.

For just like the process of casting off one shell so that we can grow into another, **change involves risk.** Are you much of a risk taker? Presbyterians, by nature, often are not. **Over the years, however, College Hill has taken many risks, not knowing exactly what would happen when it started down the path of becoming a congregation that was open and accepting to folks who were often not welcome in other congregations, for whatever reasons.**

Both our Old Testament and Gospel readings today mentioned the need to move ahead and not look back. Former Presbyterian pastor, A. Stephen Van Kuiken, wrote the following in a 1999 sermon to his More Light Presbyterian congregation in Cincinnati:

'Don't look back' is a call to adventure beyond the safeties of the past, a call to risk, a call to what may be, a call to creativity, a call simply to life. It is a call to act upon the inner stirring of the heart, not to put it off but act now. Life cannot be put on hold, or it is not life.

**We, then, must learn to live life not by certainties, but by visions, risk, and passion.** So as we look toward our future, let us learn to face and cope with change, and to take risks – knowing that God is with us every step of the way.

Amen.