



“The Challenges of Being the Church: 6. Being a Church That Engages the Community”

Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21 and Revelation 21:1-5

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

August 6, 2017

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

While on vacation, earlier this summer, I was reacquainted with an old friend. I can't really remember when we first met, but from time to time, things he said have come back to me and I always find them informative and enlightening. My friend has a strange name: Heraclitus. He lived about 500 years before Christ and once had the opportunity to be king of Ephesus, but turned down the throne. Instead of a monarch, he became a philosopher, an early philosopher, so that some of his statements and ideas were developed by more widely known philosophers, such as Plato and the Stoics. He even had a hand in shaping some of early Christianity's thought. Some in the early church thought him a heretic. But others, like Hippolytus and Justin Martyr found Heraclitus to be, what they called, "a Christian before Christ."

One of Heraclitus' principle ideas was that, if you want to understand life, you have to accept the idea that central to everything is change. In his writing that we know as "Fragments," Heraclitus writes:

By cosmic rule, as day yields to night, so winter yields to summer, war yields to peace, plenty yields to famine.

All things change.

Fire penetrates the lump of myrrh, until the joining bodies rise again in smoke called incense.

And again,

The river where you set your foot just now is gone –
the waters giving way to this, and now this.

This central idea to his work is summed up in the often quoted (and misquoted) statement: "Change is the only constant in life."

Now, I know that some of you have already tuned me out. You don't want to hear about change. You've had enough change. But, I want to offer you the possibility that change is exactly what Heraclitus said it was: our undeniable companion in life. And I'll take it a step further. Not only is change our constant companion, but a significant amount of change comes from God and should be considered a blessing. Let's keep going.

When you take a survey of the Bible, one of the things that becomes evident is that God is a God of change. God is forever taking something and changing it into something else. God takes an old man and an old woman, far past the years of child-bearing, and makes them the parents of a great nation. God takes their grandson, Jacob, who is a bit of a trickster and a con artist and changes him into Israel. God takes a prince of Egypt and changes him into the instrument for the liberation of God's people. God takes a teenaged shepherd and turns him into Israel's greatest king. God takes a young woman in a backwater town in Galilee and changes her into the mother of the messiah. God takes a ragtag group of fishers, political hot heads, a tax collector, and some other undistinguished people, and creates a force that would change the world.

God is a God of change. The prophet Isaiah proclaims with God's voice:

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

To the ancients, God promised to be a God who does new things, things that have never been before, things that would astound and amaze.

John the Revealer tells us, in the Revelation,

And the one who was seated on the throne said,
"See, I am making all things new."

John saw a day when God's will would be the way of the universe and proclaimed that even the heavens and the earth would be changed by the One who is "making all things new."

God rarely leaves things as God finds them. God is like one of those people on HGTV who finds a ram-shackled heap of a house and turns it into a designer dream home. God changes things. It's one of the things God does.

And, as Heraclitus reminds us, "change is the only constant in life."

If ever there was a time in history when Heraclitus was seemingly correct in his assumption, it is now. Change comes at us every day. Change comes at a fast pace and sweeps us up in its tornadic winds.

But, and we need to say it, not all change is good and not all change is from God or in accordance with God's plan for the world. Some changes have good within them, but can be misused and misappropriated for destructive and harmful purposes. We must exercise care and caution when embracing change. We are reminded, in the First Letter of John, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God..." (1 John 4:1a).

Change is not inherently good. Change is not inherently bad. That is the very reason we must engage with change and see where the change will lead. Change must be tested, evaluated, and appraised. We have to size up what the change will mean for everyone involved, and not just for those who will benefit from the change the most. We must deliberate and debate changes around us, to ensure that justice is done, fairness is practiced, and compassion is made manifest.

When we face change, we must examine it and see its fullest impact and then compare it to the positive and holy change that what God wants for all people.

And that means that, more and more, we must engage the community in which we find ourselves. One of the great mistakes the church has made over time is that it fails to listen and immediately speaks. We, in the church, have often had the answers before anyone asked any questions.

To effectively engage the community means listening to and speaking with the community and not imposing all the right answers and actions. We can no longer speak with a divinely inspired authoritative voice. The community simply will not listen.

Instead, we have to build relationships with the community. We have to understand its problems and challenges. We have to weigh the changes in the community against what we believe God wants for all people – and not just some. We must approach each new relationship with humility and without the know-it-all attitude for which the church has become so famous.

It is not enough for us to pass down our judgments on the actions taken by the leaders in our communities – locally, statewide, and nationally. We must take stock of the actions, engage our leaders in conversation and dialogue, and examine the full impact of the changes being considered.

Where the change flows in harmony with God's desire for people, we must flow with that change and do what we can to bring that change into reality. Where the change flows against the stream of God's love, justice, and compassion, we must go against the flow, and speak and act as God's people. Sometimes we'll be popular. Sometimes we won't. But we must always be faithful to God's call to be God's people.

Heraclitus has it right: all things change.

From 1900 to 1967, the Swiss were the leading watchmakers in the world. In 1967, when digital technology was patented, the Swiss rejected it in favor of the traditional ball bearings, gears, and mainsprings they had been using to make watches for decades. Unfortunately, however, the world was ready for this advance, and Seiko, a Japanese company, picked up the digital patent and became the leading watch manufacturer in the world almost overnight.

Fifty thousand of the 67,000 Swiss watchmakers went out of business because they refused to embrace this new technology. It was not until years later that the Swiss caught up and regained their position in the marketplace with the creation of Swatch watches.

Sometimes, God is in the change and the change comes from God. Sometimes, God is not in the change and that change should be resisted.

Then there's the story of construction workers who had taken a lunch break and opened up their lunch boxes. One of them looked inside his box and said, "Not baloney again! I can't believe it. I hate baloney. This is the third time this week I've had baloney. I can't stand baloney!"

The other one said, "Why don't you just ask your wife to make you something different?"

He replied, "I don't have a wife. I made these myself."

The fact is, most of the baloney in our lives we put there ourselves. If we ever want life to be any different from the same old baloney we keep serving ourselves, then we must break out of doing the routine.

Sometimes we need to let the change come into our lives before we can bring the change God wants as we engage the community around us. Sometimes we need to believe that God is still changing things, still doing new things, still making all things new. And where God is doing that, is where we need to be. For now and evermore. Amen.

1) Heraclitus, *Fragments*, no. 36

2) *Ibid*, no. 41



609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

First Presbyterian Church
is a partner congregation with
the Covenant Network
of Presbyterians.

