

IF IT AIN'T BROKE ...

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Though I cringe at the grammar and wonder what Miss Stevenson, my sixth grade English teacher would say, this axiom of a shade tree mechanic is helpful. I once saw on the pickup of a disgruntled federal employee, “The government’s philosophy: If it ain’t broke, fix it till it is.” And I recently saw a TV commercial which said, “We repair what your husband ‘fixed.’”

That’s the way I feel about our church as we move into transition with an Interim Minister. I told Bruce Lancaster several weeks ago, “This is a healthy, happy church, and the people like each other.” The church is doing well and I don’t want to change things. It isn’t broken, so let’s not fix it till it is.

But on the other hand, I know that all living things change as they grow and mature. And that mystery of change and continuing identity, which is true of plant and animal life, as well as of human experience, is also true for our church. We must change, and adapt, and grow. Our roots go deep and we are reaching up in growth.

There is an old and continuing debate about the nature of reality stretching all the way back to Greece in the 5th century B.C.E. Parmenides on the one side and Heraclitus on the other argued about the world of everyday experience contains elements of both permanence or change.

While Heraclitus said that everything is in a state of flux, and what appears to be permanent is in fact only changing more slowly than the eye can perceive, Parmenides argued that permanence is the ultimate reality, and change is only a characteristic of the way things appear--an optical illusion if you will. Heraclitus might have said, “the only thing that doesn’t change -- is that everything changes.”

Down through the centuries the debate has continued, and today we grasp for both alternatives: we sometimes opt for change in our secular lives while holding to permanence in our religious lives. We live in two worlds separated by church windows.

In church we sing about the "Faith of our fathers, living still ..." or we read Psalm 90, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." We sing, "Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my father, There is no shadow of turning with Thee; Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not; As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be." Or we remember the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable ..."

I have in mind two texts for this sermon: Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" on the one hand. And Luke’s summary statement on the other:

“Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52). Jesus is always the same. Jesus increased.

Within these walls we are surrounded by eternal verities and changeless values. But then we go out of the church doors and shift back into the practical experience of a changing world. We are bombarded with advertising about the latest creature comforts. We grow increasingly dependent on smart phones. We shop on the internet.

Everything changes, and we seek permanence by looking for lasting values underneath all the changing fads. We look for some constant in the fluctuations of history. And when we find a pattern or identify a lasting value which is more significant than the transitory whims of culture's taste we do gain a wisp permanence. We hope that the change to which we are subject is only a light frosting on the cake of reality. We agree with Paul, “what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18).

Others of us admit that smart phones or even smart watches may be all around us, but we argue that the really important things in life never change: marriage will never be replaced, religion will never die out, and the advice of Vaclav Havel (former President of the Czech Republic) seems more true every day, “Keep company with those who seek the truth—run from those who have found it.”

My purpose today is not to settle the argument. But I do want to point out the religious-secular split and ask whether religion must always come down on the side of permanence. Though there is precedent going all the way back to that great theologian of the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas, is it always necessary for Christians to hold a static view of faith and of God? Are the seven last words of the church engraved in granite: “we never did it that way before!”

Christians generally begin with the assumption that God is changeless and eternal in the divine being. We see secular change as one indication of a growing chasm between God and the world. For persons trying to straddle both worlds, this widening distance brings a growing frustration and a reluctance to choose between the two.

Some of us live as though God's active involvement with the world ended on the sixth day of creation. Like Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and the Deists of the eighteenth century we can believe that in the beginning God created the world, but we are much more comfortable living as though God then left it to function by itself. We find no convenient way to think about God's continued dealings with the world, and we assume that if God is all-wise, all-powerful and all-knowing, then all contingencies of history were already planned from the start. This view amounts to a kind of Divine absenteeism. God wound up creation like an intricate watch and then left it alone.

Others of us assume that Bible times were unique: God was nearer to people then and spoke to them more directly than he does today. We read in the Old Testament that God spoke to Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or we see in the Acts of the Apostles that God spoke to the church at Antioch but we know that those times were unique. God doesn't speak to people so directly anymore, we think. We feel we are now living in an afterglow of religion's burning ember. Times are different

and the scientific world has come of age with no further need of God to explain the uncertainties of life.

I believe, however, that the God we see in the Bible, and the God who has been a living presence all through the church's history, is a God alive and active in the present, and a God who beckons us into the future.

As long as we think of the Bible as some sort of computer program which contains within its instructions and memory bank all the truth people will ever need to know about themselves, about the world, and about God, we will be locked into a view which affirms the primacy of the past. We will be walled in by a legalistic religion. But if we can once get the picture of a personal relationship with God, if we can understand that knowing God is not at all like knowing calculus or quantum physics but is like knowing a child, or a marriage partner, or a real friend, then the importance of the past is cast in a softer light.

Thinking of it that way, we can see that there is always much more to knowing God than can come out of studying documents and traditions. I am not trying to do away with the past, but rather to place it in a proper light along with the present and the future. We must shift our focus of attention away from permanence and the past, to realize that God awaits us in the changing future, and to know that there is a sense in which we have not yet discovered all there is to know of God in the present.

If human beings are constantly developing and growing in their appreciation of life, and if knowing God is a relational experience rather than merely an exercise of the brain, then our knowledge of God is something that continues to change and develop.

We have developed a habit of thinking so much about what God **did** that we cannot see what God **does**, nor what God **will do**. Perhaps part of the problem is a language difficulty in which we are failing to see behind the words of the Bible to understand the ideas the authors had in mind. The book of James, for instance, speaks about "... the Father of lights, with whom there is *no variation or shadow due to change*."

The author was pointing to God outside the limits of time and circumstance. In James' experience things wore out, decayed and died. God is not limited by time in that way. God's attitude and way of acting toward people is not contingent upon the seasons, and God's love and care are not conditioned upon the capricious nature of human circumstances.

We live in a world where even our children are influenced by Einstein's general theory of relativity. A time warp has become common parlance among science fiction writers, and listening to voyagers to the brink of space we are more than ever before aware that time is only a matrix of earthly life related to our position, velocity and direction in space.

The text in James ought to be translated by thinking about the timeless character of God, by affirming not only God's presence at the start of history but also at the end of history as its goal. God is the beginning, but God is also the end of history. God is the initiator, but God is also the goal toward which history moves. The words of the author of Revelation are very much to

the point: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Rev. 1:8).

Ours is a healthy, happy church. It ain't broke, so let's not fix it till it is. On the other hand, let's not be so locked into the permanence of the past that we cannot grow. Our roots are deep in the Bible and tradition, and we are changing as we sprout new branches and reach toward the future.

It ain't broke, so don't fix it. We are a church rooted and reaching: let it grow!

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

by Dr. Carol Strickland

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Almighty God

before the mountains were brought forth

before the hills in order stood,

You were.

You created all that is and will be.

Our lives are but a tiny speck in the scheme of things.

We wonder at the mystery of it all--

a planet trillions of miles from earth which might have life aboard it,

the tiny Zika bearing mosquito,

our being here this morning and what it represents.

The universe is so vast and complex.

Our lives are their own intricate web of decisions and relationships and experiences.

We turn to you in awe

and in thanksgiving for all that is good and beautiful about life.

And we turn to you because we know you are not remote or unconcerned.

You care for all you have made,

like an artist who has painted

like a mother who has given birth.

Give us faith, we pray, to trust that you are as near as our next breath,

and to dig our roots deep into you, the ground of our being.

Give us hope, we pray, to face our future without fear,

and to remember that you have helped us in the past and will not forsake us now.

Give us love, we pray, to reach up and out

never to stop embracing, and welcoming, and giving.

We give thanks, Lord, for those among us who have lived a long time;

who have weathered life's vicissitudes with grace,

wise and faithful witnesses who know what it is to practice faith, hope, and love.

As bodies wear out, do not let souls grow dim.

As wrinkles multiply, so increase our respect.

As the end draws nearer, draw us closer.

We give thanks, too, for the parade of saints who have gone before,

leaving us a wonderful legacy—in religion, in science, in art.

May we hold dear all that in it that is good and true,
even as we are alert to your Spirit
calling us to new ways, new insights, new worlds.

We live in troubling times, O Lord,
Have mercy on all who suffer from earthquake and flood, war and disease.
Where we can be agents of your compassion, send us,
for we follow your son
who taught us to do good and share what we have
and in whose name we now pray as he taught us:

Our Father. . .