

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8 (NEB)

For everything its season and for every activity under heaven its time:

a time to be born and a time to die;

a time to plant and a time to uproot;

a time to kill and a time to heal;

a time to pull down and a time to build up;

a time to weep and a time to laugh;

a time for mourning and a time for dancing;

a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them;

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek and a time to lose;

a time to keep and a time to throw away;

a time to tear and a time to mend;

a time for silence and a time for speech;

a time to love and a time to hate;

a time for war and a time for peace.

HELLO, GOODBYE

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

It keeps happening over and over. It never ends. No matter how much effort we put into stopgap efforts to ensure it never happens again, we cannot prevent it. It is as much a part of our lives as breathing. And sometimes we actually love it and intentionally make it happen, but just as often we bemoan it and wish that it had never occurred. I am speaking, of course, about change. And one thing I have learned over years of ministry is that while there are many things people in churches dislike, change is at the top of the list.

I remember when First Presbyterian called my deceased friend, Dan, the culprit who persuaded me to try preaching again. The PNC specifically sought someone who would make changes. And he did. But when he had the audacity to modernize the worship service a bit, he met a wall of resistance and some long-time members even stopped coming. Others, however, welcomed the changes and new faces began to arrive. But the voices of the critics were louder and after five years of being constantly badgered, he went elsewhere. Did those who had left return? Of course not. And unhappy about the circumstances leading to his resignation, the newer folks left as well. So much for change!

We hate to lose members whether they just stop coming, move or leave us through death. Every member we lose has an effect upon all of us. It means somebody has to pick up the slack of the work they were doing; the budget takes a hit; a pew spot is empty; it requires a reshuffling that alters our group dynamics. And a pastor retiring, departing for another position, dying or even being forced out punches a church right in the gut. Losing people hurts. And in a small church like this, it can represent a threat to our very security. Large congregations can weather the storms. But we have to focus on replacement of our losses for survival. And that is a difficult proposition in this day and age when church attendance is declining across the board.

It is tough on you to lose John as your co-pastor. It is tough on me too. I told Diane I feel as if I am working on my third marriage. John and I collaborated so well together—as did Susan and I. He did his job, I did mine. We never crossed boundaries into the other's territory and fully and completely trusted each other to fulfill our individual responsibilities. We are professionals. And given John's more extensive background in parish politics and administration, I highly valued his perspective and sought his input on a variety of issues. It was a perfect marriage!

But he is gone and we will replace him with a very competent person and we will all adjust to the new realities, personality and skills the new co-pastor will bring. And as Trinity goes through this process once more, it seems to me there is value in reflecting upon the spiritual issues that change presents to us both as a congregation and as individuals.

Our scripture from Ecclesiastes, widely ascribed to Solomon, is one of the more poignant in the Bible. It nakedly lays on the line what life is about—change. Life has its crests and its valleys; we have good luck, we have bad luck; and Solomon juxtaposes one experience over against its opposite: *a time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot; a time to seek and a time to lose; a time for war and a time for peace.* Life is full of opposites. It is the ying and yang of being human. The passage leaves one feeling wistful, sad and hopeful at the same time. It also suggests that you never get too high or too low because life is like the weather—wait a little while and it will change.

But while we must honor our emotions about John's departure and not hopscotch over them, we must at the same time move on. And we need a theological framework into which we can place our feelings which will allow us to work through them and emerge in a different place than where we began. As Dr. Suess, one of the great philosophers of our time said, "Don't cry because it is over, smile because it happened."

We are currently in a spiritually intriguing place. For it challenges our natural inclination to avoid pain and resist change. Some of that has to do with wishing to avoid going through

grief for our loss, but an equally significant motivation is fear over the future. We don't know what it holds and how it will play itself out given what we have lost. And then we struggle with our faith over whether God will play a role in that future and guide us in adapting to our new reality.

And so we find ourselves in a conflict between two sets of possibilities. The first is represented by what mathematicians have named the Chaos Theory. Simply stated, this means that if all of the components of reality were static—meaning that they exist in a steady state—then you could predict the future with 100% certainty. You throw the dice and they would come up snake-eyes every time. But as we know, change occurs in extremely unpredictable ways, affected by many factors which are often totally unrelated. Every weather forecaster knows this as does everyone who plans an outdoor wedding. And the maddening thing about it is that the minutest of alterations can create enormous variations in what actually happens. Weather is forecast by running hundreds of computer models which attempt to take all of these potential variants into consideration—and then take your best guess. The farther out your forecast, the less chance you have of accuracy.

We all know that life is just as unpredictable. So now we must balance the Chaos Theory with its opposite—the Emergent Theory. Simply stated, this theory agrees that while the universe cannot stand still—its steady state is change—there is nevertheless a singular constant which underlies the movement in all of that change. For when you have change, what follows is an adaptation to that change in order to have the system survive. A lightning bolt creates a vacuum which air rushes in to fill causing thunder.

The Emergent Theory—which is spiritual at its core—asserts that there is master Intelligence behind those adaptations and that radically new things will continuously emerge that we could never have imagined and seemingly come “out of nowhere” as it were. Is the Intelligence behind those adaptations what we know as God? Does God work in the world

through this mysterious force driving adaptation to change? We know without doubt that the universe is expanding at an ever increasing speed. Isn't there a parallel with human progress? Just consider the rate at which we are advancing technologically—it is mind-blowing! What we once thought were limits we could never even approach are now far in the rearview mirror and we just keep moving forward at an accelerating pace. It all starts with change and nobody can explain where the energy for the adaptations to these changes comes from. It simply is. Just try to stop it!

So now we must ask ourselves if this life force—this energy—comes from God? And if we decide that it does, then the next question we must answer is this: do we dare trust God? Is God working for us? Or are all of these adaptations just a mindless energy like water seeking its own level that cares not what it floods or who it drowns? Does it, like us, have consciousness? Does it care about us? In giving his answer to that question, Einstein remarked, "God does not play dice with the cosmos."

So how does this inform us as we work our way through the changes in the leadership of our church? First, it means we must accept that there is, as Solomon wisely observed, a time and a season for everything. I believe we would all prefer to be planting rather than uprooting and dancing rather than mourning. But we are currently in transition which is not only okay, but very important in the life of the congregation. Because transition creates space for growth to occur. It allows for reflection and then action upon how we envision ourselves to be. It actually forces us into that position. As one spiritual writer put it after going through difficult life changes: *Things aren't perfect or easy, but what I understand now is that life is not about avoiding pain: it's about going through it and continuing on...growth is what we are here for.*

So rather than resisting change, let us accept it and then relax, trusting in what we already know—that this has happened before and will happen again—but hasn't the Spirit always provided guidance in some surprising ways? Transition gives us an opportunity to open

ourselves to explore feelings and ideas we never had before. One change allows us to move forward with further changes—ones that we choose rather than those that are simply thrust upon us. How can we not see that life moves forward rather than in reverse? Life is the power of the universe. It can and does adapt to and come into harmony with any circumstance with which it is presented. And we have that capacity as well. So when we welcome a new co-pastor into our ministry, we can say Hello and Goodbye at the same time. May God bless us going forward and keep John in his care as we continue without him.

Rev. Tom Dunlap

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