

Sunday, October 23, 2011
Orinda Community Church UCC
A Sermon by the Rev. Frank Baldwin

TIME AND CHANGE

Matthew 6:19-21

I. With the all-important college football season already half over and the class reunion season currently in full sway, I want to reflect with you for a few minutes this morning about time and change. For a number of years after I went to theological school there, a certain well-known eastern university used to send me their slick monthly Alumni Magazine. This went on until the circulation office realized that I didn't want the magazine enough to pay for it, and my unsolicited subscription suddenly ceased as mysteriously as it had begun.

But there was one thing in the Alumni Magazine that I always enjoyed reading, and this was Professor Thomas G. Bergin's featured nostalgia column, "Time and Change." Written in the flowery travelogue style of about 1910, "Time and Change" was a shamelessly anachronistic piece of campus reporting, well-oiled with classical references, smarmy Old-School-Tie sentimentalisms, understated athletic hoopla, obscure literary allusions in two or three foreign languages, and a stiff dose of smug, self-congratulatory prep school humor (most of which went straight over my head).

The purpose of this feature was obviously to reassure the rich elder grads that the university was still almost as good as it was in their day, lacking only a few more millions in alumni contributions to attain the legendary standards of yesteryear. Against what was then a rather dismaying background of campus protests, town-gown conflicts, and the almost unthinkable advent of co-education, "Time and Change" offered the university's "good old boys" the hope that some things, at least, will never change, certainly not the old school with its ivy-covered halls, professors, and traditions!

Professor Bergin's column always reminded me of that cartoon which appeared in the New Yorker many years ago, showing two crusty titans of industry reading the newspaper in their sumptuous private club. "I declare," says one, "The Times" is not as good as it was." To which the other snaps back, "It never was!" But Mr. Bergin, in his way, also raises a serious spiritual paradox far more important than whether the old school is as good as it was (or was it ever?).

The greater problem is how one hang on to values that ought to be trustworthy, eternal and true within a culture awash with sham, illusion and change. Where do we look for that fixed and reliable center in the spinning moral universe where so much is daily compromised, disproved, and given away? This is the urgent human dilemma of finding a safe harbor amidst the storms of life. It is the question of keeping faith and hope alive in an imperfect and unfair world: who to believe and in what to believe? Spiritually, it is also the problem of a created order estranged from its creator; the paradox of a finite people having an infinite God.

II. It's pretty obvious that all living beings, and all human institutions, are confronted with the problem of change. Whether we desire it or not, whether we like it or not, whether we deserve it or not, stuff happens to us. As Jesus observed, "The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike."¹ Time and tide wait for no one, and a large part of what it means to be mortal is to experience the inevitable insecurity and impermanence of life, to have a share in that profound anxiety of spirit which the existentialist philosophers called *angst*.

The Bible deals with this – over and over again – because the Bible cannot help itself but to embrace the human condition in all its perplexities and ambiguities. Our scriptural stories are so very often about people facing unavoidable change: the gaining and losing of power or wealth; the disruptions of home and family; the wars and upheavals of government; the religious movements and counter-movements; the experience of judgment and deliverance, exile and exodus, conquest and defeat, the sojourns in strange places; the seeking of one's self and the saving of one's soul. That's on top of our everyday exposure to the personal exigencies of birth and growth, work and learning, gain and loss, sickness and strength, hunger, danger, weather, chance and fate; to say nothing of the whole amazing repertoire of human emotions from love to fear and back again. The Bible has been around long enough to know about *all* these changes.

Since everyone – and every time – is faced with the problem of change, the underlying, searching question of scripture is frequently: "How then, will you respond to this?" "What will you make of this stuff that's happening to you?" "Where, in all these changes can you find new meaning and direction and purpose for your life?" You see, the Bible astutely recognizes you that *change* always comes to us in the company of *choice*. In response to change we may find ourselves having to choose between crying or laughing at our predicament, between standing our ground or retreating, between making the best of it or making the worst of it, between seeing the glass half full or half empty, between wringing our hands or rolling up our sleeves, between rising to the occasion or sinking to the bottom.

The choices that are ours to make in response to time and change are never reached in a moral or historical vacuum. How we deal with the changes that come our way is influenced by our upbringing (perhaps even by our DNA); by our formal and informal education; by our past experiences, present expectations and future hopes; by our values and the social mores of our families, friends, peers and communities; by our self-awareness, and of course, by our faith. Consciously or unconsciously, it's faith that provides the perspective in which we make necessary choices in response to change. Do we choose faithfully or faithlessly? Therein lies all the difference in the world!

If we face times of change with our choices informed by our faith, we open ourselves to God's guidance and help regardless of whatever may happen. We align ourselves with God's grace and goodness even before we can discern it clearly in the changing circumstances. We are on our way to proving the spiritual axiom that there is no change which God and we cannot handle together. And we begin to experience life as an amazing journey in which change happens that we can embrace and transform and use for

good; radically different than life as a fixed point in time wherein change must be automatically feared and fought and rejected as either undesirable or evil.

Jesus in his day was a big up-setter of arbitrary and unchanging ways of thinking and behaving. He foresaw the dangers and frustrations ahead for those who worship the past, despise the present and fear the future; he recognized the temptation to make false idols out of inflexible dogmas, rules, rituals, customs and habits. And when he urged his followers to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven”² he was talking about a lot more than just money. The greatest treasure of the human spirit is our faith. What Jesus asked of them he still asks of us: to place our ultimate trust and confidence, hope and destiny, faith and love in God alone: “for where your treasure is,” he said, “there will your heart be also.”³

III. As she does every year around this time, Dagmar in the church office has been working on her annual update of our Directory of Members and Friends. Doing some proof-reading for her, I’ve been amazed at how many changes there have been in our little family of faith during just these past twelve months. Some of us have been born; some of us have died. Some have moved away; some have come newly among us. Some have changed addresses; some have changed names. Some have become active members; some have become inactive. Some have started walking; some are finding walking to be increasingly difficult. Some have experienced deep joys; others have endured profound losses. The changes in our new Church Directory – over 50 in all, Dagmar tells me – reflect and represent the great and minor movements of life, and reflect the deep, powerful force of change flowing through our spiritual community.

Lucy Hupp Williams, a lifelong member of Orinda Community Church, said to me the other day, “The church is different.” And so it is; but it is also very much the same. Externally and internally, we are passing through the same changes as everyone else, but in our mutual faith there is also present among us something changeless and eternal: and that is the God and spirit of Jesus. Through time and change, through 50 church directory updates, or 500, or 500,000, God remains. Trust in the kingdom of Heaven, my friends, and place your treasure there!

¹ Matthew 5:45

² Matthew 6:20

³ Matthew 6:21