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“Change Is Good: You Go First!”  
(With thanks to Harvey Martz, St. Andrew, UMC)

January 21, 2007  
Acts 9:10-19

A woman brought home a beautiful plaque that she had purchased at a gift shop,  
which said: “Prayer Changes Things.”

She hung it right in a prominent place in her home, as a constant reminder  
of the power of prayer to change reality.

After a few days, she noticed it was gone.

She asked her husband: “What happened to my new plaque?”

He said, “I took it down.”

She said, “Why? Don’t you believe in the power of prayer?”

He said, “Of course I believe in prayer! It’s change I can’t stand.”

I am focusing upon change this month because, as you know, there are some  
major changes ahead for our congregation.

For those of you who have not yet heard the news,  
by a margin of two to one this congregation voted to relocate our church.

During the next few months we will begin that process of moving.

And while it will be exciting, it will also be very challenging and demanding.  
It is going to require much from all of us, this a leap of faith into the unknown.

There are things we will need to change long before we move,  
and it is going to stretch all of us in new ways.

Change is hard, there is no doubt about it, but the hardest change of all is when we  
ourselves are the ones who need to change.

It is painful when we have to look deep inside our own hearts and souls,  
and decide that perhaps we need a different path and perspective,  
perhaps we have been wrong.

I know from personal experience what a struggle it is to change myself.  
Over the course of my life I have tried to let go of some deeply ingrained  
habits, personality traits, behaviors, and opinions. It is very, very difficult.

It is far easier, I have found, to ask everyone else to change, instead!

One of the things I have had to change over the years is my practice of ministry.

The church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not the church of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The church has too often been stubborn, outdated and irrelevant.

People have different spiritual needs and interests today,  
it is just a different world altogether, and the church must change or die.  
And if this old dog can learn a new way of doing ministry, anyone can!

The book of Acts in the New Testament is about the phenomenal changes which occurred in the early church after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Astonishing numbers of people were coming to Christianity, and many in power were threatened by this movement and working to eradicate it.

Some of the opponents of this movement would go from house to house, drag Christians out and put them in jail for calling Jesus the Messiah.

One of the most strident opponents of the Christian movement was Saul of Tarsus.

He was a leading Pharisee, well versed in Jewish law, who hated all Christians. He was determined to expose their behavior as treason and eradicate them totally.

He exposed many Christians in Jerusalem, and was on his way to Damascus, where there was also a large group of these followers to turn over for punishment.

On the way to Damascus he had an experience which knocked him down and struck him blind. He heard Christ asking why he was persecuting him.

For 3 days he could not see, eat or drink.

One of the Christian leaders in Damascus, Ananias, also had a vision, in which Christ asked him to go visit Paul and lay his hands on him to heal him.

Ananias was a Christian, and he does not want to have anything to do with Paul.

He knows how he persecuted Christians in Jerusalem, and had some of them tortured and murdered.

But Jesus does persuade Ananias to go and lay hands on Paul, restoring his sight, and filling him with the spirit of God.

At that point Paul's blindness is healed and he stays with the Christians in Damascus until he has recovered enough to go and spread the Gospel.

Can you imagine how suspicious people were of this man Paul who had so recently persecuted them and handed them over to death?

One minute he is persecuting them, and then

suddenly he has a change of heart and is passionately promoting Jesus Christ?

It would be like Hillary Clinton becoming a Republican, it would not make sense.

Paul underwent a dramatic change which totally turned his life around.

He had to admit that he had been wrong, and that he would now behave differently

But Ananias had to be changed, have the scales drop from his eyes, as well.

He had to see Paul in a different light, be open to the way God would use him to bring countless people to Christ.

Both of these men had to admit that they had been wrong, and turn their lives in a completely different direction.

Being open to change like that takes trust, faith and great humility.

Some people just cannot do it at all. They would literally rather die than change. Think of the flat earth society, those who believe the Holocaust never happened, those who believe global warming is a hoax.

In the early 1700s in American churches there was introduced a new invention to help people sing. It was called a Hymnbook, a collection of loose pages, with music and words printed on them to teach people how to read music.

Prior to this in the churches a song leader would sing a verse, and the people would then repeat it.

Believe it or not, there was a mighty uproar over this new fangled way of singing hymns, and one minister preached about how evil this was.

He said: “This is a needless change, since our fathers got to heaven without it.”  
 “The people who want this kind of music are young upstarts and some of them are lewd and loose.”

People naturally resist change, especially when they have to do the changing. It is easier to deny that anything needs to change.

We get so locked into our perspectives, our behaviors, our habits, our opinions, that we never believe the problem might just reside within us.

People say, “I don’t have a relationship problem, drinking problem, a shopping problem, a gossip problem, a problem with my temper or gambling.

I am just fine the way I am. I don’t need to change.”

Like the man who visited the doctor complaining of chronic headaches.

The doctor knew him very well, and so he gave this advice:

“The best thing you can do is to eat well, take vitamins and get your rest. Stop drinking, stop carousing, stop smoking and running around all night.

That is the very best thing you can do.”

The man was silent for awhile and then said,

“OK, doc, thanks. But what is the NEXT best thing I can do?”

People just don’t want to change, even when they know that they must.

I don’t believe you can be changed` without help from a power beyond yourself. Without humility, hope, and faith, I don’t know how people are ever changed.

But with those things, I have seen the most stubborn, hopeless causes given new hope and new life, and I include myself in that category, as well.

It really is true, that:

“You must be the change that you want to see in the world.”

You have to live into the sort of future that you envision for yourself and the world, to live as if the truth were really true.

Would you take a moment now to be completely honest with yourself, and think of a change that you need to make in your own life?

It might be your opinions, habits, relationships, lifestyle.

It might be the way you spend your time, or your attitude toward yourself.

Let us reflect for a moment in silence about what we need to change in our lives.

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The book of Acts is amazing and inspiring and I want to invite you to go home today and read it. You will be impressed.

I am going to be reading and studying and preaching from Acts in the next few months, and when you read it you will understand why.

The first chapter of Acts talks about the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

He appeared to his disciples after his death, on the Mount of Olives.

He said to them: “You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.”

He promised a spiritual power to be with them, to guide, and help them.

He said that his followers could do amazing things, miraculous things, even change themselves and change the world.

This is the promise we have, because those who trust in the invisible can do the impossible.

Let us resolve to actually BE the change we hope to see in this world.

God will be with us every step of the way.

Thanks Be To God.

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Today 9 young people in our church are taking a bold step in faith.

For 12 weeks they have meet with Jim Marshall, learned about their beliefs visited other churches, examined what it means to be a spiritual person today.

They will come and kneel on this altar and promise to faithfully support this church with their prayers, presence, gifts and service.

And we will promise to support them and learn from them as they teach us how to change gracefully in the days ahead.

Would our 9 confirmands and their families, please come forward?