

Sermon for July 29, 2007: Changes

Hosea 1: 2-10

Colossians 2: 6-15

Luke 11: 1-13

Sometimes it's amazing to me, and borderline scary, how much God really is in control of things. I put together this worship service a few weeks ago, including determining what I thought God wanted me to speak about – changes. And this sermon IS about changes – but the illustration has drastically changed from what I had prepared on Tuesday and Wednesday. The underlying message is still the same – only the illustration has changed, with permission.

Yesterday afternoon Pat Chadwick reminded me of a sermon that I had preached a while ago, called “New Normals” or something like that. The conversation took place in the surgical intensive care unit waiting room at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, where, about 30 hours before, Pat and John Smalley's oldest daughter, Jenna, had been care-flighted as a result of an accident she had outside her place of employment for the summer. A lot has changed in the Chadwick and Smalley households in the past 48 hours or so. For a while on Friday there was a very real chance that Jenna would die as a result of her injuries. But, thanks be to God, she is in critical but stable condition, and even though she is facing some surgeries in the near future as a result of her injuries, the doctors are cautiously optimistic that she will make a complete recovery. But things have changed – and one of the biggest is that we all have a new appreciation for the preciousness of life, and the grace that informs our days.

When we consider what Jesus taught us about grace, when we reflect on the examples that we have in today's scripture readings, we see this pattern of Jesus setting goals, Jesus asking God for guidance and direction, Jesus acting on that guidance and direction, and Jesus' persistent efforts to accomplish those goals. We know that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem with His disciples when they asked Him to teach them His ways – and especially how to pray like He did. They knew that Jesus prayed to His Father constantly – here, they ask Jesus to teach THEM how to do that. So Jesus taught them to pray for what GOD WANTS FOR THEM (and by extension, us) – which may or may not be what they (or we) would have asked for otherwise. Then Jesus gave them some examples: He showed them that persistence matters. He showed them that by a real life example, and then by telling them to knock and keep on knocking; search and keep on searching; ask and keep on asking. That is the sense of the Greek here – it's continuous action. And Jesus reminds them that, as bad and as inadequate as we can be, we still try to give our children things that are blessings, good and healthy. And if we do that, how much will God do – and especially, if we are asking for what GOD WANTS FOR US, of course God will give us the Holy Spirit, to guide us and keep us.

Jesus taught the disciples, and by extension, us, to pray for what GOD WANTS FOR US. Jesus taught the disciples, and by extension, us, to pray with persistence. Jesus taught the disciples, and by extension, us, to act as we pray. Jesus taught the disciples, and by extension, us, to remember that God is faithful.

But if God is so faithful, why do we have to be so persistent? Why does change have to come? The story from Hosea seems to say that God changes God's mind. How can this be? Are we nagging God into compliance, in the same way that children try to nag parents into doing what they want?

Jesus' baseline assumption about praying was that God wanted the best thing for Him, and also the best thing for humanity. God wants what is best for us. The Old Testament may

anthropomorphize God when it portrays God as getting angry with human behavior, but maybe not. What human parent has not, from time to time, felt like tearing their hair out over their child's behavior? Anyone who has ever been in an on-going relationship with a child knows the frustration I am talking about. And we have all experienced the fear that comes when a child that we love has been hurt. We want the best for these children whom we love. And God wants the best for us, these children whom He loves. God wants the best for us.

But things happen. Sometime changes happen that we initiate. Sometimes changes seem to happen randomly. Those changes can bring us to our knees. If we are assuming that God wants the best for us, then the persistence that we offer in our prayers is not to badger God into submission – as if we could do such a thing – but rather it is to remind us of who is in control. Persistence in prayer helps us to reframe, and to remember who really is in charge. When we remember that God wants what is best for us, persistence can help us to discard the silly little things that would otherwise distract us. Persistence helps us to focus on the big picture.

Persistence also implies action, action on God's part, and action on our part. God acts, and God expects us to act. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them, and He did. And Jesus later charged them with taking that teaching out into the world, to tell others the Good News – that God our Creator wants what is best for us as individuals, and for us as His family. Jesus revealed glimpses of the Kingdom of God to His disciples – and He expected them to reveal glimpses of that Kingdom to others. He persisted – and He expected them to persist. He made adjustments, even while He kept the main thing the main thing – and Jesus expected His disciples to do the same thing.

Not all of the changes that we experience will be fun. Sometimes, as a result of changes that happen to us, we need to significantly retool our plans. But when we remember that GOD WANTS WHAT IS BEST FOR US, when we remember that WE ARE NOT LEFT ALONE AND COMFORTLESS, then we can persist. When we ask God to give the Holy Spirit to us, to guide us, to comfort us, to help us persist, then God, who is faithful and true, will not leave us comfortless or alone. Sometimes the changes that we face, the situations that we encounter, seem insurmountable. Jenna looks like she will eventually make a complete recovery, if she is persistent and if she hangs in there like she has in the past, when she was growing through her childhood and teen years. But sometimes when changes hit us, and we are persistent, we are still disappointed and hurt – not everyone recovers from catastrophic accidents or illnesses. Yet somehow God is even there – God knows what it is like to have a Son, His Son, murdered. God IS there – we will never be left comfortless or alone.

Changes happen. And yet the Good News that we are to share with this lost and broken world that God loves so much is that God is present. So let us persist, knowing that GOD WANTS WHAT IS BEST FOR US, and that because of what Jesus did for us, we are never truly lost or forsaken. May we help one another, and those in the wider world, endure their changes, be strengthened by those changes, and persist in the middle of those changes, while listening to the Holy Spirit, whom God will send, until His Son returns in glory. And even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Hosea 1: 2-10

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, “Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.” So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. And the LORD said to him, “Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.” She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the LORD said to him, “Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen.”

When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said, “Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not My people and I am not your God.” Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, “You are not My people,” it shall be said to them, “Children of the living God.”

Colossians 2: 6-15

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in Him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In Him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with Him through faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead.

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with Him, when He forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

Luke 11: 1-13

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” And He said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”