

Sunday May 4, 2025
Third Sunday of Easter

MESSAGE “The Far Side”

Mrs. Goldbloom was sitting on the front step of her home with her head buried in her hands, weeping softly, when along came her good friend Mrs. Applebaum. “Goldie dear, what’s wrong?” asked Mrs. Applebaum. Mrs. Goldbloom said, “You know my son, Hershel? Of course you know my Hershel. Well Hershel wasn’t a good Jew, so I sent him to Israel to study, and what happens? He comes back a Christian! Oy! What am I going to do?” “Funny you should say,” replied Mrs. Applebaum. “My son, Moisha, he wasn’t a good Jew, so I too sent him to Israel, to work on the kibbutz, and what happens? He comes back a Christian! Oy! What are we going to do? I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to go see the Rabbi and tell him our problem and see what he thinks.” So the two ladies go off to the Rabbi and tell him their sorry tale, to which he replies, “Funny you should say. My son, Avram, was not a good Jew, so I sent him to live with his cousin Mordecai in Israel, and what happens? He comes back a Christian! Oy! What are we going to do? I’ll tell you what we are going to do. We are going to pray to God. God of our fathers, God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, our sons weren’t good Jews, so we sent them to the Holy Land, and what happens? They come back a Christian! What are we to do?” And a deep, booming voice from the heavens says, “Funny you should say!”

Change happens, and it doesn’t always happen the way we want, or when we want, but it happens. Change did not happen for Hershel, or Moisha, or Avram the way that their parents had hoped for. Change happened for Saul on the road to Damascus. He was off to arrest any Jew there who claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, to take them back to Jerusalem where they would be tried for blasphemy and likely sentenced to death, death by stoning.

But on the way, a strange thing happened. A bright light flashed around Saul, he fell to his knees, and he heard a voice ask him why he, Saul, was persecuting him. Saul lost his vision but made it the rest of the way to Damascus. After several days, and a vision, Ananias went to Saul, laid his hands on him, and Saul regained his vision. Saul changed from the biggest persecutor of the followers of the Way, and became the apostle Paul, the staunchest defender of the faith.

The Christian life is all about change. We call it conversion, Christian growth, faith formation, spiritual journey, transformation, or pilgrimage: our faith ideal is change! Once we had booming Sunday schools, now we have but a handful. Once we had youth and vitality, now we are growing old. Once we were two congregations, now we are one! Once, everyone in this country was Christian or indigenous, now there are people of other faith traditions; Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and others, or of no faith tradition at all. Once everyone went to church on a Sunday morning, now we work, we engage in team sports, we sleep in, we spend time with family. The life of the congregation and the life of our society have changed. Some of the change has been positive, some not so much. Some of the change we have worked for, some has been foisted upon us. Two things I know, if we as a denomination want to continue being, we have to continue to change, and we can either take control and drive change, or be reactive and allow change to happen to us. Either way, change will continue. At the age of 90, our former Moderator, Dr. Robert McClure, said, "If you are not changing, you are not alive!"

And change is what the gospel lesson is all about today. Jesus has died and risen, and the disciples don't really know what to do. They do know that they are afraid of the authorities who crucified Jesus, and they aren't anxious to come to the same fate, so they go back to what they know best, fishing. It was great following Jesus, but now that he's gone, they decide to go back to the way they always lived before, like nothing changed. So, there they are,

out on the water, fishing all night, and not so much as a single fish to show for their efforts. And then this lunatic on the shore shouts and tells them to try fishing on the far side of the boat. Doesn't he know how much effort it would take to move the folded net from one side of the boat to the other? Doesn't he know how difficult it would be to move all the counterbalance weights from the far side of the boat to the near side? And to do it all while the boat is in the water, they could easily capsize. Fish on the far side of the boat, indeed! And yet, they did it anyway. I mean, what did they have to lose? Immediately the net was filled with large fish, 153 of them. Immediately they knew the lunatic was no lunatic. Immediately they knew that the person on the shore shouting directions was Jesus.

This is the gospel text on which the Rev. Dr. John Pentland based his book, "Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith." And that is the basis of his presentation this past Friday at Thamesville United Church, where Tabitha is currently serving.

Have you ever heard insanity defined as continuing to do the same thing the same way over and over and over again, each time expecting a different result? That's sort of what Jesus was saying to the disciples, oops, they changed that day. No longer were they disciples. That day they became apostles. No longer were they students, now they were missionaries, sent to spread the good news of the kingdom of God. As I was saying, Jesus was saying to the apostles that they couldn't lower the nets off the near side of the boat and expect a catch, if they wanted to catch fish, they had to change what they were doing and move to the far side of the boat. Jesus was saying that the apostles, that **we** can no longer continue to do things the way we've always done them and expect a different outcome. If we want a different outcome, we have to change what we are doing and the way we are doing it.

Like it or not, change is coming here, in Dorchester, at the end of February. That is only 10 months away. I'm not talking about changing things that should remain constant, like: our belief that we are created by God; our belief that God created us to be in relationship with God; our belief that God loves us, no matter what; that we find God in community; none of these things are changeable. What is changing is that I will be leaving. I know that change is frightening for most people, but fear doesn't stop change from happening. The question for you now is, do you want to wait until March and be forced to react to the change when it happens, or would you rather make some difficult decisions now about what your future will look like. Will you call another minister? Will you join another congregation? Will you keep or sell this building? Will you share a minister with another pastoral charge? And, perhaps more important, will you put your hand up to serve on a committee to help bring this change about?

You are not alone. Change is coming, if it isn't already here, for most congregations within our denomination. Indeed, it is coming or already here for most congregations within the so-called mainline churches – the Anglicans, the Presbyterians, the Lutherans, and yes, even the Roman Catholic Church who will be electing a new pope in the coming days.

I think that change is one of the few constants, perhaps the only constant in life. The question is, will you continue to fish off the near-side of the boat, can you learn to fish off the far side, or will you learn to fish for people?