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A Mighty River **I Corinthians 1: 22-25**

The movement known as Christianity changed and challenged every convention of the known world. It did so only because, first of all, Christians were able to change themselves. Christianity, like a mighty river, called the Gentiles of that day to change their conception of the cross and make an extraordinary conceptual leap of the spiritual imagination, coming to see the cross not simply as an instrument of torture and death for the vilest offender, but a means by which the God of the universe might redeem the entire world. Christianity like a mighty river called the Jewish people of that culture to change their conception of the Messiah as a clone of David, to discard the notion of him as a ruling king and make a leap of the spiritual imagination to see the very face of God's anointed in the face of a crucified Nazarene peasant. The early church changed the world because the Spirit God called the early Christians to change the way they thought about each other. For the Jewish Christians this was especially difficult. They had been raised and shaped by Scripture and centuries of tradition to see the Gentiles as unclean. Now they were being called, simply on the basis of a common faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, to receive these pagan Gentiles as spiritual equals. Talk about change! Men who had been raised never to worship with women were suddenly called to accept that not only were women eligible for worship, but they were taking an active part, speaking and singing! Talk about change! This Gospel called slaves to consider themselves equal to their Masters. This Gospel turned everything topsy-turvy because the Spirit of God was unleashed into the world and Christ was making all things new. If anyone was in Christ, then he or she was to be about the process of being made a new creature! Like a mighty river, the Christian movement challenged all conventions and thrust the world forward!

Put yourself in those early churches. Could you have handled that much change?
Could you have accepted eating with people when you had been told all your life that it was unclean even to walk into their household?
Could you handle worshipping with women, when they weren't even supposed to be in your sanctuary?
Could you handle rethinking everything you'd ever been taught about Samaritans, tax collectors, lepers and harlots as among those eligible for inclusion in the Kingdom of God?
Could you handle that much change?
The church is a mighty river that swept the world toward change because Christians opened themselves to God's Spirit and allowed that Spirit to change themselves.
Behold, Christ made all things new!

There are certain compensations for traveling in the wee hours of the morning to a ski slope in West Virginia. About two in the morning last week the moon cleared the clouds and lent a beatific light to that snow-covered countryside. The entire region appeared as a vast, gleaming, frozen lake. Every now and then we passed a small pond, hard frozen, its surface solid as a hardwood floor. Then we came to the sizable Greenbrier River, running alongside the town of Marlinton. In the moonlight, it, too, shone with a glazed radiance that suggested it might have succumbed to the arctic conditions and become completely congealed.

But daylight revealed otherwise. In places the river was hemmed in by ice, but in the middle, the current continued to move forward, bearing heavy floes on its shoulders, the river's energy defying all attempts to make it inert, ever moving, ever effecting change. Stagnant water freezes. Rivers move. Rivers *run*. Rivers are defined by action. The church is a mighty river. The church of Jesus Christ is meant to be full of energy, always effecting change throughout the course of history. Of course, some would say that the Christian church has worked to retard change in human history. That is a half-truth.

A more balanced assertion is that the church of Jesus Christ has been a mighty river moving toward change, but that representatives of Christianity have often arrayed themselves fiercely against change.

We witnessed two lovely young women being baptized this morning.

Did you know that centuries ago, Christian authorities would have drowned those young women in a parody of their beliefs, because church authorities opposed the practice of believer's baptism?

When you open your Bible and read such marvelous passages as, "You cannot serve God and mammon," "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow," "It is more blessed to give than to receive,"

remember that while Jesus said those words, the man who translated those marvelous phrases into our language, William Tyndale, was burned at the stake for giving us the Gospel in plain English.

Most every practice we think of as commonplace was at one time a freedom won through violent change.

This coming week the British Parliament will celebrate one of its most extraordinary members, a nineteenth-century politician named William Wilberforce, who spent his life trying to abolish the slave trade.

Though the effort cost him his good name, his health and almost his sanity, by God, he prevailed!

After years of failure he prevailed 200 years ago, this week.

Yet in our own Southern culture, ministers continued to preach for decades that one man's owning of another was God-ordained.

Never forget that the civil rights movement for racial equality was a church movement, even though many forces within the church were arrayed against it.

Thirty years ago, a young woman, who now happens to be my wife, was told by her pastor, "I wouldn't ordain a woman minister for all the hundred dollar bills you could put in this sanctuary."

That was a lie. For that much money he would ordain an orangutan (though probably a male orangutan).

It was a bitter pill for an impressionable young woman to swallow. Yet she persisted in her dream.

When it came time for her to be ordained, her home church closed its doors to her.

Her church thought that by taking a rigid stance for orthodoxy, it could stymie her spiritual pilgrimage, but the mighty river that is the Christian faith found a way for her faith to find expression.

Just a generation ago many Baptist preachers would not re-marry anyone who had been divorced.

Even now, the Southern Baptist Convention will not appoint a divorced person as a missionary.

Yet the church of Jesus Christ has continued to move society forward, like a mighty river, even though forces within the church have tried vainly to resist such progress.

The church of Jesus Christ has always recognized this paradox: *change is the key to stability*.

Change is the key to stability!

Ten years ago I did what leaders must do.

I stood in this pulpit and challenged this congregation to change and become a more open and gracious congregation where homosexual people could come and worship.

Indeed, I challenged us as a congregation to do something even more radical than that:

I challenged us to dispense with placing people in categories altogether and just treat people as people.

The fact that some, even within the church, consider this to be a radical call, remains surprising to me.

Yet we as a congregation have wrestled with this divisive and volatile social issue for a decade,

and though we by no means hold to one common view of homosexuality, we have reached a consensus that this will be an open and gracious and accepting congregation toward all people.

I applaud the way that you have honestly and graciously forged this consensus together.

It has been a study in positive change, though certainly the change has not been easy.

We are among a handful of churches in our state who have been singled out for exclusion from the State Baptist Convention because of our openness to gay and lesbian people.

We as a congregation have taken note of the State Convention's restrictive principles and have acted to remove ourselves from such a group.

For some of us that isolation feels difficult. *It is difficult.*

But don't worry about it. We are in the right, to be on the side of love and grace and inclusion, and in time, other congregations, Baptist and non-Baptist, will come to see this issue in the same way, for the church of Christ is a mighty river for change, and if you resist its current, you will grow stagnant.

Only change is the key to stability.

Ten years later, I now issue another call for change. Indeed, I issue a call to radical change.

Soon I intend to ask the deacons and the worship committee for the freedom to create an alternative worship service that would draw from the Gospel model of the African-American church, making frequent use of African-American musicians and worship style.

Why would I seek to do that?

Because I am convinced that the next generation of believers will not be drawn to traditional worship, to the kind of worship that we practice – to the kind of worship that we do very, very well.

I am convinced that the next generation of believers will be drawn to a worship style

that is more casual than ours, and expresses itself in more exuberant forms of music. I am convinced that the African-American community can teach us something about worship if we are willing to learn.

I am convinced that the next generation of believers will seek a worship experience that is cross-cultural.

I am convinced that we can take some of the best of their worship traditions

and blend them with some of the best of ours and create a new form

that will afford the next generation of worshippers a new style through which to praise God.

It's change, yes. But change is the key to stability.

Now I am crazy, maybe; but I am not stupid.

I know there is nothing to be gained by replacing classic Coke with Diet Coke – or even Diet Pepsi.

We do traditional worship well. We excel at it. Let us continue to do traditional worship well.

For some of you, it's the only way you know how to worship. That is fine.

But let us give ourselves the freedom to create an alternative that will reach a generation of people that we have not heretofore reached.

Let us experiment our way toward a different worship style that might enable us to reach a *whole culture* that we have not heretofore reached.

I am pretty certain that my children and many of your children are not going to be drawn to the kind of worship that we love. We have to offer them something new.

Change is the key to stability.

I've been thinking about this issue for a very long time, ever since six or seven years ago, when I had a conversation with a young man who said to me, "I enjoyed your worship.

Your people are very friendly. But your church is a little too conservative for me."

I started to correct and enlighten him, *when suddenly he enlightened me.*

He started talking about my robe, our hymns and anthems, our prayers and readings, and I suddenly realized he wasn't using the term "conservative" in a theological sense.

He was using it to refer to the spectrum of worship styles.

I thought "Wow!"

All of my ministry I have criticized the fundamentalists for being stuck in the past on such issues as racism, sexism, homophobia and the like.

But suddenly I thought, "I bet if we took a picture of our worship now and compared it to our worship of forty years ago, there might not be that much difference."

The conservatives have a mindset that is stuck in the past.

Maybe we have a worship style that is stuck in the past.

Our church has been far more progressive in embracing social change than the conservatives, but maybe they have been more progressive than us in embracing stylistic changes in worship.

We have the more relevant substance.

But maybe they have the more relevant style.

As I was driving down the road it occurred to me,

"My goodness, I might be a fundamentalist."

For fundamentalism is not an ideology.

Fundamentalism is a mindset that is resistant to change.

So it was, a month or so ago, as we celebrated our Martin Luther King service at St. Paul's Baptist, the service blended the African-American style of worship with certain elements of our own,

and it turned out to be such a glorious night of worship, I thought,

"Bingo! This is a style that we could use as a paradigm for a new creation."

So, I issue a call for us to exercise the freedom to experiment.

I certainly have no exact idea of that the future will look like.

But I am convinced that while many of the contemporary models of worship are thin in content and style, we have a chance in blending the best of the African-American worship tradition with our own to create a model of theological meaning and emotional depth.

It's worth a try.

One thing I know.

Not far from here there is a church where no one asks for money,

where no one ever gets on each other's nerves,

where there are no grumbles about worship style,

and the preacher never challenges anyone,

because that church is dead, locked up, closed and dark.

That is not the church of Jesus Christ, for the church of Jesus Christ is a mighty, vibrant river.

This church must be a mighty river, too.

The mighty river that is the church of Jesus Christ will flow forward, inexorably forward!

We must have the courage to flow with it.

We were baptized into Christ Jesus, which means we were raised to walk in newness of life.

Newness of life!

And change is the key to stability.

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