

Character of Change

On Tuesday, October 17, 1989, at 5:04 p.m., an earthquake struck the San Francisco Bay area. The World Series was just beginning and they were ready to throw out the first pitch at Candlestick Park. As the earth shook, the steel girders in the stands began to shake and pieces of concrete broke off. It was very frightening even though it lasted for only a brief moment.

When Candlestick Park stopped shaking a voice came over the public address system and asked everyone to immediately evacuate the park in an orderly manner. Some people, unhappy because they had come to see the World Series, argued and shouted out, “Play ball!”

Meanwhile, across town in the Marina District houses built long ago, many in areas with fill, were actually crumbling and falling apart. Across the bay on Interstate 880 in Oakland a bridge had collapsed and taking lives with it. Within a moment’s time many millions of dollars worth of damage was done. An earthquake had dramatically changed life so that it would never again be the same.

Geologists had predicted that an earthquake would come, although they didn’t know just when. Even in retrospect it was not possible for them to say exactly what had happened.

Some people were better prepared than others because in areas of California and other earthquake zones there are what are called earthquake-proof buildings. Other people were taken by surprise and were totally unprepared.

Change is an unavoidable part of life. In some ways that’s good because without change life would be terribly boring. So we take delight in different kinds of foods, in changing seasons, in a variety of experiences. But we sometimes are greatly dismayed over the bad changes that come—deteriorating health, social upheaval or intrusions when a burglar or an assailant enters our lives and changes them unexpectedly and permanently. We don’t like it when people come into our comfort zones and inflict changes that we would simply not choose.

Sometimes we react strongly to changes that are going on around us and within us. We dislike them. We may try to ignore them. Perhaps we fight back with everything we have. Or, we may passively accept those changes no matter how intolerable they may seem.

Long ago the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus debated Parmenides on the ancient philosophy, “What is the very essence of human experience and what makes the world the way it is?” Heraclitus said the essence of everything is change, that change is the only constant. He used fire and water to pictured change, saying, “Fire is constantly changing. It is never the same. That is what fire is all about.” He went on, “Step into a river. Now step out. Step back in again and it’s a different river. You can never step into the same river twice because it has changed.”

Since change is universal, inevitable and irresistible, let’s consider some of its characteristics. Change is something we understand so well that a definition isn’t usually necessary. But language historians tell us that in our English language the words “change” and “exchange” have the same roots. In all probability they were once essentially the same word. So, change is really an exchange. The dictionary definition of change is “to alter by substituting one thing for something else.”

If you have poor health, you try to get good health. You have one job and you exchange it for another job. You want to exchange bad things in life for things that are very good. We take off old clothes and put on new clothes. It’s the same every time—change is always exchange. But that means that to get the new we always have to give up the old—like it or not. There always has to be a trade-in; there always has to be an exchange.

The primary character of change brings with it two sides. Sometimes we like the exchange. You have a rattletrap of a car and are delighted to get rid of it, so you exchange it for another car. You

The choice isn’t whether we change or not, the choice is how we handle change.

exchange a dirty old diaper for a clean new one, to everyone's relief and delight. You get rid of things you don't like and get things that you do like.

But the other side of exchanges are what we don't like: losing health and getting sickness; losing a lifelong marriage partner and getting widowhood; giving up a sense of safety and security that's been forever robbed by some assailant. The character of change is exchange.

If we're really going to understand what change is all about we need to agree with Heraclitus by saying that change is constant; it's always going on. It's fun to analyze the way people in our culture think. Our society has been greatly influenced by the camera. Cameras present pictures in two different ways—stills (which are snapshots) or movies. Often we think of life in terms of snapshots. We think of a house or a family or a car or anything else as frozen in time. In reality, though, life is far more like a movie. It is constantly moving and changing, always different. But, unlike movies, you can't rewind it and play it backwards. You can't clip out the parts you don't like or add something else.

A congregation that meets one week will not be the same the next time it meets. Next time some people won't be there. People will move away; new people will come. Some people will die and others will be born.

Change is constantly occurring. Expand that over the 5 billion people of the world—all changing every second. Add it all up and change is very real. There are no exemptions from it.

It wouldn't be so bad if we were able to isolate ourselves from all the change going on around us. But that is absolutely impossible. Individual decisions can never be made in isolation from other people. The actions and choices of other people change us.

A classic example of those who resisted change is the Amish of Iowa and Pennsylvania. They have fought change in many areas. For example, education can't go beyond the 8th grade; automobiles are forbidden; modern appliances are not allowed. Many of the Amish still travel with horse and buggy and wear clothes that are part of another era. They end up in conflict with federal and state governments over the requirement to put reflective triangles or flashing lights on the back of their buggies so as not to cause automobile ac-

cidents. Yet they are not isolated. They can't be. Even though they don't use electricity or have modern conveniences, the old Amish have a lucrative business with tourists who come to see how they live. They struggle, too, with a large number of their adolescents abandoning their community every year.

We cannot help but be effected by the changes of other people because everyone is in motion. Like an enormous river we are all constantly moving and changing. The choice isn't whether we change or not, the choice is how we handle change.

Track with me as we consider more about the character of change. For each of us change flows from many different currents. One of those is the set of internal currents. We all have differences that are peculiarly ours. Some we've chosen like jobs, marriage, what we eat, where we go, and many of the options of life. Every day we all face a wide variety of choices. The choices we make are an expression of who we are. It's our personality.

However, there are many parts about the internal currents of who we are that we don't choose; they are imposed upon us. The date we were born, our gender and height, much of our genetic makeup are all things about which we had absolutely no choice. As much as we may want to, there's nothing we can do to make ourselves taller or shorter or older or younger.

These internal currents may be tough to cope with. That's why some of us seek counsel. We may be introspective because we struggle with all the currents that may be pulling us in one direction or another.

Life would be challenging enough with just the internal currents, but we face other currents as well. There are the personal currents that affect us in our relationships with others—marriage, divorce, births, deaths, employment, family, friends.

I knew a psychology professor with a Ph.D. who once got off the track while giving a lecture and started talking about the death earlier that year of his father. I remember the occasion. The professor was about 50 years old but he still found it hard to fight back the tears. His most memorable line was, "I've had to cope with the recognition that for the first time in my life, in a half century, I'm no longer anyone's son." He had defined himself in terms of this relationship. Now that the relationship was gone he had to redefine himself.

In addition to the internal currents of who we are and what we choose and the personal currents of the relationships around us are societal changes. Television is a major influence. The average American watches 21 hours of television a week. Foreign wars have been and are being fought in our homes every single day. Values we agree with and values we vehemently disagree with are constantly being hammered at us. Researchers are virtually unanimous in saying that never before has it been the way it is now.

In the early 1990s management expert Peter Drucker said that the 21st century actually began in 1975. He continued that the last 25 years of the 20th century really belonged in the 21st century because we had already been catapulted into major societal changes.

Waves of change are growing larger and crashing closer so that it is difficult for any of us not to be influenced and affected in major ways by all that is happening in the world. These changes relate to drugs, globalization, environmental pollution, political polarization and economic realignments. As these changes take place they do so in a combination of process and point. When change takes place through a process there is forewarning. It may have been courtship that led to marriage or studies that led to graduation or a career re-evaluation that led to a new job but it was spread over months and maybe even years. But there are also changes that come at a point in time with no forewarning. Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson were both unexpectedly elevated from the position of vice president to president upon the deaths of the presidents under whom they served.

While we ordinarily think of those changes that catch us by surprise as being a point in time, the truth is that major changes are almost always the result of a process. Rarely in marriage or divorce or job hiring or firing do any of these events happen in an instant. Even when a person dies of a massive heart attack and it seems to be so sud-

den and unexpected, medically we know that the heart attack has been building for a very long time. It's the culmination of a process. The difference is that sometimes we see the process and sometimes we don't, but the process is always there.

One thing we can do to cope with change and even manage it is to see and understand that process. When we're aware of what's going on in our bodies, our marriages, our church, our community, our families or our society we are far less likely to be taken by surprise. We are in a better and stronger position to impact the process in ways that will affect the outcome.

But, where is God in all of this? Does he know? Does he care? Does he have power over what happens? Or is God also being swept along by the huge changes that are taking place in our world? Does he know all that's going on? Is he changing to keep up with modern times and with what's happening in our lives?

Whether we face extraordinary happiness or unspeakable pain and disappointment, God is trustworthy. We can always trust him.

The Bible is quite clear about all that. The Bible tells us that God does not change. In 1 Samuel 15:29 we read, “(God) does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.” In Malachi 3:6 we have the straight-out declaration, “I the Lord do not change.” And in James 1:17 we read, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

The Bible teaches us that God is sovereign. He is, therefore, in ultimate control of every change. In some ways that can be unsettling. We wonder how the world can be going the way it is if God is really in control. But his declaration to us that he does not change is not intended to unsettle us but rather to assure us that even the most diverse and difficult and extraordinary circumstances and changes can be brought around to God's good ends. He guarantees from the beginning that the end will be good and that the end will be right.

Far more important than our intellectual questioning is our response to whom God is in all the

change that transpires around us. Recognizing who God is and that he doesn't change calls us to responsibility and trust. The responsibility is that we obey God and become his agents of change. We become his representatives. We trust him to represent us well. We obey a God who knows what's going on. But it's also trust that whether we face extraordinary happiness or unspeakable pain and disappointment, God is trustworthy. We can always trust him.

All of this, I know, sounds rather theoretical. We think, "But for me, change is what happened at work last week. Change is what my family's going through this month. Change is what I think the doctor's going to say on Monday morning. Change is my hopes and dreams. Change, for me, is a better tomorrow."

Sometimes it seems as if everything is changing. The reality is that God gives to us an extraordinary opportunity to live for him and trust him through that change. We live and change and trust and obey.

A few years ago our family vacationed in Florida and made the essential pilgrimage to Disney World. I've been to a lot of places in this world, but Disney World is one of my favorite places. I like it there. I just accept that as part of who I am on the inside.

One of my favorite rides at Disney World is called the Carousel of Progress. It begins in the 1800's and shows a home with a family and all the modern conveniences of that time. It then moves you along generation by generation up to modern times with big screen televisions and microwave ovens and computers. And, all the way through, the same song is sung:

Now is the time; now is the best time;
now is the best time of your life.

Life is a prize. Live every minute. Open your eyes and watch how you win it.

Yesterday's memories may sparkle and gleam; tomorrow is still a dream. Right here and now you've got it made—the world is marching and you're in the parade.

Now is the time, now is the best time;
be it a time of joy or strife. There's so much to cheer for; be glad you're here, for it's the best time of your life.

Without God that simply is not true. When painful and difficult changes come, I don't hear anyone saying, "It's the best time of my life." But with God we can face change on the inside and in our personal relationships around us and in the flood of all that's happening in our world. With Jesus Christ we can genuinely sing, "... be it joy or strife ... there's so much to cheer for; be glad you're here ... for it's the best time of your life!"

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
©Leith Anderson