

## **A New and Different Church**

A Meditation by Rev. Joe Hoffman

Text: Acts 11:1-18

*May 6, 2007*

We are in the midst of Eastertide – a season in which we celebrate the resurrection, the new life of Christ, as we remember that death could not do away with love and life. That God will be who God will be. That God's Spirit will continue to break forth, that God will continue to speak to us and be with us.

As the pastor of our church, I have watched us go through many changes over the past almost 11 years now. At Dan Bowers memorial service a couple weeks ago, I was remembering with several from this church that we have had a lot of these memorial services and funerals for people we dearly loved. Many from that original congregation when I first came are no longer with us, and that is one of the changes we have been through.

I have watched us become an ONA church – a careful and prayerful process that we engaged in with storytelling and seeking to find God's way for us. I remember the day we voted – and waiting for the votes to be counted. Dorri was the moderator, and we were standing side by side singing a hymn as the little sheet of paper with the vote tally was handed to her. I wanted to see it right away – but she wouldn't let me. She smiled and held it tightly as we sang. I think she knew that whatever was on that little slip of paper, we had to trust God to be God and to show us our way. And I learned that most of the time, in this church at least, I am not in charge!

I have observed us as we made hard and important decisions about our vision, about selling 308 Merrimon Avenue and moving into interim space at Kenilworth, as we made capital campaign decisions and building choices for Piney Mountain. I have watched us as we changed our plans in short order about 2 years ago now and voted to give up our dreams on the mountain in order to purchase this old historic building on the edge of the center of the public arena. All of these were hard choices. All of them stirred up stuff in each of us. All of them changed us in some way.

And through all these changes, some people have left us and others have come to join us. Friday night I was back in our old building on Merrimon Avenue to see a play – and some of you also were there. We were talking about how small the space felt. We wondered how we ever got so many people in that space. After worship, at the start of our forum today, we are going to do a quick exercise that will indicate how many of us have been here for how long – and it will be fascinating to see how many of us have come in only the past few years. There aren't many churches where you are an old timer after 3-4 years!

And there have been other changes too. Changes in how we are community. Changes in how we get to know each other and care for each other as the church grows. Changes in how the staff relate to the committees and congregation. Changes in how we do worship. Changes in our voice in the larger community.

And sometimes, I find myself reminiscing about the old days. When it wasn't so busy. When it wasn't so complicated. When I had more time to just sit and visit with folks. At other times I remember how back then, I longed for us to grow into some version of what we have become.

Change is inevitable if we are going to stay alive and healthy – or so they say.

But change doesn't come easy. Those early followers of Jesus wanted something different in life – that's why they followed Jesus in the first place. Walking around with Jesus, learning from him as he taught in the synagogues and on the hillsides, as he healed those who were sick, as he shared food around the table – all of that was what it meant to be part of the Jesus movement. And it all lasted about 3 years. Not so long. And yet, long enough that when Jesus was captured, killed, and then resurrected – these followers who knew the heart and presence of Jesus better than anyone else – well, they too were not sure what to do with the changes. Suddenly they found themselves having to make decisions without Jesus being there in the same way – and they had to decide how to select their own leaders – and basically, they had to decide what they should now do.

According to a commentary I was reading this past week, this story we have heard read this morning “affirms the radically new era ushered in with the advent, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Christ). The community related to Christ finds itself in an old, familiar ballpark but playing a new and different game. Some of the players have changed, making for a new team. The game demands changes and a fresh set of strategies. It is a time of excitement and expectation... (But) the expansion of the team to include new players does not come without struggle. (and this gets us into our particular text for today.) Peter learns about it in a dream, and then has to go and explain his dream to the old players, who are understandably reluctant to welcome the newcomers. In fact, the playing of a new game in an old park is filled with all sorts of tensions and at times frustration. The contention between the old and the new sometimes reaches a fever pitch.” (p. 305, Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on Year C)

Well, I'm glad it is not like that for us! No tension among us! No differences of opinion! No struggle with how to structure our church or select our leaders! No different ideas about how to do worship! No diversity among us about social justice issues or the arts or how to make financial decisions. I am glad this text was for those people long ago and not for us!

Of course I am playing with us. What these first followers wanted was to follow Jesus, to be filled with his spirit, to be community with each other. They didn't want it to be work! Life is hard enough already without becoming part of one more thing that takes our time and energy. But work it was – and the leading agent of that work was not Peter or any of the others sitting around in the circle, it was the work of God's spirit. It was not Peter's gift of preaching that inspired the Gentiles to want to live in the ways of Jesus – it was more the spirit of God moving and shaking and opening a new way.

How to be church with those who are like us is a challenge. So being church with those who are different from us is even more challenging. The decision by God to open the Jesus movement to the Gentiles – to all the world – to all people – including people who don't think like me, who don't eat the same diet as me, who don't dress like me, who don't believe like me – what in the world was God doing?

Those first followers had no idea what to do with God's generosity of spirit. And if they didn't know what to do, those who walked and talked with Jesus in person – if they didn't know, how in the world are you and I suppose to know today.

But that is the good news. God is still calling. God is still bringing people from death to life, from despair to hope, from hatred to love, from loneliness to community, from an old way to a new way. And we in this church are in the midst of those changes. And it is hard at times. And it is wonderful at times. And it is work at times. And it is joyful beyond all imagination at times. And it is us!

I have dreamed of our being in this strange, challenging place for 10 years. – not really knowing what the dream would feel like if and when it became real. I have dreamed that we would learn how to be church together – at first so that we could keep the old, wonderful spirit of this 93 year old church alive. But then – so that we could become an even more vibrant, faithful, justice seeking, storytelling, dancing, singing, artistic, praying, loving presence in Asheville.

As we have tried – sometimes struggling and falling down, sometimes exceeding beyond our wildest imaginations – we have become who we are now. We try to do as Jesus invited us to do – to have a table open to all who are hungry for justice, to all who are hungry for meaning, to all who thirst for God's love and grace in their lives. There is no particular statement of belief that is required. That grows out of the covenant relationship we have with each other – and it changes for each of us along the way – and it changes for all of us as a congregation from time to time as God's spirit keeps poking at us, keeps nudging us, keeps calling us to places we never intended to go.

And what holds it together – that's what feels so elusive to us. Is it our by-laws? That is important. Is it our staff? They are important – or at least those of us on staff think we are somewhat important in the big picture! Is it our budget? Is it our building? Is it our loudest voice? Is it me? Is it you?

I think the heart of the text reminds us that it isn't any of these things – although all are important. It is the presence of God that holds us together. The elusive, ever present, sometimes distant, sometimes silent, sometimes whirlwind, sometimes whisper of God.

We have come to a place we didn't intend to be. And we know that God is with us – even with all the mistakes we have made. This is a wonderful time for us. A wonderful opportunity to be the church, to be joining with God in the work of bringing forth life and hope. May we continue to take on the challenge with courage and faithful commitment.