

Change We Can Believe In

June 28th, 2009

John 1:14-18

¹⁴ So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. ¹⁵ John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'" ¹⁶ From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.

When Mike came to the office two Thursdays ago, I told him that I wasn't sure what I planned to talk about this morning. He suggested something about new beginnings or change. I had actually been thinking about something similar to that, but until last Sunday I wasn't sure what angle to take in speaking to you. But I wrote the initial notes to this sermon while I heard Mike speak in the traditional service last week. Mike was preaching from the same place that Leigh Ann had been just two weeks before. And though that's not a bad thing, it is different. Change is a part of being human. Life is in a constant state of flux. One season of life ends as another one is beginning. Nothing stays still for long. Life is sometimes quick and ruthless with our feelings – we often have little time to adjust to much less navigate the twists and turns that come our way. But that's because life encompasses something bigger than that change we feel.

Now, when we talk about change it can be approached from two main perspectives. One way is to emphasize the need for change – the idea that God has entered our heart to bring us to a place that is different that we we've been before. In that way change is not only good, it's godly. But the second perspective is the one I'd like to address this morning. And that is when we feel like we've seen *too much change*. When enough things in life have shifted so that we feel off-

balance. Uncertain. Maybe even fearful. For even though change can be positive, too much of it can also threaten our security. I think that's part of human nature. In the counseling I've done, I've noticed that people don't always choose the best option available to them. Rather, they choose the *familiar* option – the one they know will make them feel secure. Too much change sends us clamoring for something familiar to hold on to. This morning I want to talk about coping with change...and finding our identity and self-worth in God, not in our circumstances.

We've heard a lot about change over the past year: politics, financial markets, national and international conflicts. We can start with the campaign slogan for Barack Obama in last year's presidential election: "Change We Can Believe In." That's an unusual saying, isn't it? It encompasses the belief that in changing our circumstances, life gains meaning. This, of course, isn't any old change – it's change for the better. That idea is very much a part of the fabric of our society – the idea that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and make our circumstances bend to our will. And I think a healthy work ethic is important. But there's another side to that equation. What if things don't improve after change comes? Well, most of the time, people begin to feel that they have done something wrong. That they aren't worthy of the success and progress they long for. Somewhere along the line we have been given the impression that our value and worth is tied to our circumstances. We'll come back to that idea in a minute.

I was thinking the other day about how many opportunities for change exist in our lifetime. What makes the first year of marriage so difficult is the struggle to adapt to that new spouse's paradigm. We spend hours learning the mindset and emotional clues of the person we love. Eventually, we think we may have them figured out a little bit. We become comfortable with them and peace effortlessly floats into our home, right? And then you have children. People told me that my perspective would change and that I would actually get a clue about life when I had children. Of course, they were being condescending...but they were right, too. Nothing makes us put our own wants and desires on hold like raising a family. At no time must we juggle the impossible schedules of several individuals like when

our home is full of children. Children are great – but they also keep us on our toes and require us to plan and think far into the future...when really we'd rather be thinking about well, at least for guys, sports. At other times we are thrown into national and international conflicts that threaten to disrupt everyday life. Those of you who have served in our military understand probably more than anyone what it means to serve, honor, and protect something greater than yourself at a moment's notice.

My question this morning is: how do we find worth in something greater than our circumstances? How can we live with a sense that we are a part of something greater than our individual agendas? Our culture doesn't teach us that. Our culture teaches us to be self-occupied and egotistical – completely consumed with our circumstances. It's the disease of our nation. And we thrive on it. I know a lot of people who aren't happy. Or at least they aren't happy for long. Most people ride a roller coaster of reactions to what happens to them in any given day. In America, this is compounded by our affluence. We really don't know what real suffering is! When asked about work, we complain, "Oh today was horrible!" When asked why, we mention things like, "I couldn't finish my Excel spreadsheet because my email inbox was overflowing and my Blackberry just wouldn't stop ringing!" or "It took forever to get my special order latte this morning, someone just *had* to get in a car accident and that put me behind schedule all day!" Obviously, I'm being facetious, but we have to admit we generally only have "small" problems.

If I remember correctly, the etymology of the word "happiness" comes from "happenings" – events in life that produce a specific emotion. In other words, the emotions of "happy" people rise and fall according to what "happens" to them. We live lives of reaction. If, of course, you have to perfect life, then you'll always be happy. But remember, we're the same people that complain if our dry cleaning isn't ready for pickup. Our lives suffer at the hand of our circumstances. Our treatment of others, our attitudes, and personal worth rises and falls on the praises or criticisms of acquaintances and co-workers – people that really have

little bearing on who we truly are. Yet, we let the actions of others and the “grind” of life mold us into people we don’t want to be.

I like history a lot, so I like to study how we came to believe in the ideologies we value as a nation today. One of the more fascinating ones to date is the idea of “self-esteem.” Now, when I say self-esteem, I mean the general ability to evaluate ourselves and have that self-image affect our behaviors and moods. We live in a culture that values the idea of a healthy self-esteem, and rightfully so. We spend a tremendous amount of time securing the self-worth of children in our educational systems, our governmental programs, and through non-profit organizations.

So, where do people go when looking for worth? Well, since the rise of the Human Potential Movement in the 60s, we most often seek healthy self-esteem in our value as human beings. By developing our potential as humans, we can achieve the quality of life that we desire. We can be fulfilled and content and...well...happy. And though psychologists go into more complex forms of self-image, this is the idea that drives the popular movement towards happiness. In other words, this is the “Dr. Phil” version. So, we grow up with the idea that we should think well of ourselves and recognize our merit as individuals with valid hopes and dreams. Everything we need to live a happy and fulfilled life is already present in us.

But after 40 years, we’re beginning to see the reality of that paradigm. In 2004, the American Psychological Association put out a report that challenged that idea. After surveying 600 people from the ages of 50 to 90, they determined that many of the individuals had “high” self-esteem but said they were unhappy. They knew they were smart, talented, resourceful, and educated. But they felt they had missed something along the way – some set of goals they didn’t meet. In other words, though they felt comfortable with who they were, they recognized that all the things they had accomplished were of little significance outside of the praise and accolades they received at the time. Even those with “healthy” self-esteem are slaves to their circumstances.

And here's what we can learn from that: the idea that we possess within ourselves those qualities that will ultimately make us happy is false. It's a self-defeating model because it attempts to derive worth and value from a source that always fails. Society tells us to be happy with who we are and then barrages us with qualifiers to that self-worth: education, credentials, social connections and the like. You are only as good as your ability to out-perform the next guy. That's why people ride the roller coaster of life reacting to the changes that come our way. And though none of those things are necessarily bad, we give far more value to them than they actual give back to us...and it creates a constant reminder that we will never measure up to the standard to which we are held. Reputation, status, financial stability, high levels of education, physical attractiveness, athletic prowess, even personal integrity leaves us empty. And because we're empty, we grasp and claw and hold on to whatever circumstances validate who we are: a job, a community position, money, our children, our spouse, even the reputation of our church. But when change comes, we're devastated – because the familiar is gone and our security is threatened. In the end, change is something we *can't* believe in.

As usual, God offers us an alternative. Self-esteem is derived from something deeper: *God-esteem*. I am convinced that deep down, *what we think about ourselves is directly related to what we believe God thinks about us*. Behind each of our motives lies a deeper truth: the core of our being is directly tied to how we view God. If you believe God thinks little of you, then you'll think little of yourself. If you wake up every morning to a God who plans to bully you through adverse circumstances all day to teach you some patience, then your day isn't going to go very well. If you believe God tolerates you, then you will merely tolerate others. But if you believe God is gracious and kind...if you believe that God not only loves you, but that God *likes* you, you will esteem yourself differently. Honestly, 99% of events in a day have little effect on your life. Yet, we swing back and forth, acting like insignificant issues are life-changing. There are only two reasons for this: 1) we're bored or 2) we have nothing *more permanent* to base our outlook on.

God-esteem places full confidence in the permanent *character* of God. For me, this is based solely on the unyielding love of a God who wants my affection and devotion. His love for me is unconditionally the same at all times in life. Churches have heard about the love of God so much that they fail to realize what it entails. The key to understanding the love of God is to understand that it's unconditional. Before I understood what unconditional love meant, I had assumed that God's love was like that of a parent or friend – it rose and fell based on my performance for him. When I say that I mean I believed that although God “loved” me the majority of the time, I felt like God rarely approved of my walk with him. His love, acceptance, and approval was conditional – based on the circumstances of my behavior.

Unconditional love is love that isn't swayed by performance. And though I knew that there was nothing I could do to make God love me less, I had missed the other side of unconditionality. There was nothing I could do to make God love me *more*. So, all my attempts to get God's attention were not increasing his delight in me. I was not winning him over with my scripture memory or my praise and having my radio preset to K-Love. He was winning *me* over with his unconquerable, unstoppable, undaunted love for me. I was the *center* of God's full, intense, and romantic affection. And I was not getting his attention – he was stalking me with an undying level of infatuation that never ends. And there was nothing I could do to change that – all I had to do was lay back into his love and rest there my whole life.

Love without conditions. Without reservations. Without qualifications. Though others may see me as a failure, in God's eyes, I never am. So my outlook on life never changes – and my view of myself reflects that permanence of God's unconditional love. My self-esteem is really God-esteem. How does God esteem me? *He loves me.* And there's nothing anyone can do about it! That's the ultimate “happening” in life...a truth that lives above the ups and downs of life's circumstances. God-esteem keeps us stable in times of change – it's the only permanent thing on the planet. And that's the root of lasting joy and fulfillment.

When you can stake your life on the reality of Zephaniah 3:17: that God takes “delight in you with gladness/With his love he will calm all your fears/He will rejoice over you with joyful songs,” then you have something that gives you permanent joy. That’s what God thinks about me. That’s what God thinks about *you*.

Our scripture this morning reflects this truth. How do we know that God loves us unconditionally? We find the answer in Jesus. Jesus is God explaining himself to the world...inviting us into his forgiveness and grace. “God became flesh and dwelt among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. For the law was given through Moses, but God’s unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. Jesus, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.” We were created to connect with God in such a way that the changes of life seem trivial when we’re basking in the glow of God’s unconditional love.

Coping with change involves resting in the truth that something more permanent lies beyond the changes we see in life. Circumstances come and go, but at no point do we cease to be the sole focus of God’s intense unfailing, unconditional, eternal love. That’s a reality that doesn’t happen overnight for most people. You may feel you are undeserving of that type of love. I have good news: you’re in good company. No one deserves it. *That’s the point*. Yet, we gladly receive it. And as we learn to live our lives in that awesome truth, our dependence on the accolades of others, the tyranny of the workplace, and the desire for material things are seen for the second-rate things they are. Nothing compares to the unconquerable love of God. It’s waiting for you this morning.