

"Embrace Change"
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Colonel Sanders tried to convince the Pope to change. It seems that Kentucky Fried Chicken was losing money. So Colonel Sanders called the Pope at the Vatican and asked him, "Please change the Lord's Prayer from 'Give us this day our daily bread,' to 'Give us this day our daily chicken.' If you do that, I'll give the church ten million dollars." The Pope said, "I can't change the Lord's Prayer." So they hung up. Then about a month later Kentucky Fried Chicken was still losing money. So again Colonel Sanders called the Pope and said, "Please change the Lord's Prayer from 'Give us this day our daily bread,' to 'Give us this day our daily chicken.' And if you do that I'll give the church fifty million dollars." And the Pope said, 'I can't change the Lord's Prayer.'" So they hung up. About a month later Kentucky Fried Chicken continued to lose money. So again Colonel Sanders called the Pope and said, "Please change the Lord's Prayer from, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' to, 'Give us this day our daily chicken.' If you do that, I'll give the church a hundred million dollars." The Pope said, "I'll get back to you." So then the Pope called his bishops in from all over the world. He said, "I've got some good news and I've got some bad news. The good news is we're getting a hundred million dollars." And one of the bishops asked, "What's the bad news?" And the Pope said, "We just lost the Wonder Bread account."

How many of us like change? I mean, I suppose it depends on what the change is. If it's change for the better we like it, but if it's change for the worse, you don't. We sometimes don't like our personal lives to change, at least unless it's for the better. Sometimes we don't like our health to change...for the worse. For the better, that's OK. We sometimes don't even want our favorite TV show to change. We certainly don't want our favorite TV show to be cancelled. We sometimes oppose change, but sometimes we have to embrace change. It's like the five stages of grief, which I think should be called the five stages of change. We have to get to that fifth step, which is acceptance. We have to accept change. Sometimes we have to accept change in church. Sometimes change happens and we just have to embrace it. They say that the only constant is change. And sometimes we then have to embrace change.

Tracy Morgan was forced to change. Tracy Morgan, the comedian and actor, who was in 30 Rock. You probably know that about two years ago he was in a fatal accident. A semi-truck struck his vehicle from behind. The driver had fallen asleep at the wheel. It killed Tracy's best friend and Tracy was in a coma for eight days. He said it broke every bone in his face; they had to repair his brain. He was in a coma for eight days. He said that during that time he went to heaven, he had a near death experience. He went to heaven and he saw his late father. His father said, "I'm not ready for you yet, son, you've got to go back to earth, you've got work to do. You've got to raise my granddaughter." Tracy and his wife had recently had a baby girl, she's now about two years old. So Tracy came out of the coma and after much rehabilitation: maybe you saw him on the Emmys last year, he came walking out, on his own, and he got a standing ovation from his colleagues. He said, "I was just ecstatic to learn, once I came out of the coma, that I was not the one that messed up." His life changed, as you might expect it would. I saw him on Oprah this past weekend and he said that he says, "I love you," two hundred times a day, many times even to complete strangers. He says that's how we're supposed to be. We're supposed to love one another, we're supposed to care for one another. He says his comedy is now a gift to people. Every time he goes on tour he's spreading the gift. And he's so thankful for his life.

Has your life ever changed dramatically because of an accident, any kind of pain that you've suffered? How has that changed you? Has that made you a better person, as it seemingly did for Tracy Morgan? Sometimes change happens. Sometimes it initially seems bad, but then maybe, over time, it seems good, even if it was painful. You come out better because of it.

Saul changed. Saul was persecuting Christians. Saul, you may recall, stood by and held the cloaks of those who martyred Stephen. Saul may have even taken part in the killing himself, the killing of Christians. He was anti-Christian. And then he's on the road to Damascus. And all of a sudden, he sees a bright light, and he hears a voice. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And Saul says, "Well who are you, Lord?" And the voice says, "I am Jesus." Then Saul is instructed to continue on to Damascus, and he's blind. For three days he was blind. Until he regained his sight with the help of Ananias. He regained his sight and was baptized and became, perhaps, the greatest Christian ever.

What would Christianity be like without Saul becoming Paul? We wouldn't have more than half of the New Testament. He wrote most of the Epistles in the New Testament. He wrote to the church in Corinth and in Galatia and he started many churches. Jews and Gentiles became Christians because of Paul. Paul changed. Paul embraced change. If he hadn't, maybe we wouldn't be here today.

God changes us for the better. According to the Psalmist in Psalm 30, God heals us, God restores our lives, God changes our weeping into joy.

How has God changed you? How has God changed your life for the better? Maybe God has taken you from the wintry days of Michigan to the sunny days of California. Maybe God has healed you. Maybe God has restored your life. Maybe God has changed you from weeping to joy. God changes our lives for the better. How has God changed you?

Jesus' boyhood neighbors could not accept the change in Jesus. Jesus had performed miracles, said profound things, and yet he goes back to his hometown and they're like, "Who are you? Who do you think you are? You're just the carpenter's son. We know you. You're the son of Mary and, presumably, Joseph. We know who you are. You're nobody special. Don't think you're better than us. We remember you as a little tyke. We remember you running around the neighborhood. How are you special? And they couldn't accept Jesus as the Son of Man, Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus as Lord and Savior, Jesus as a great prophet.

And I wonder if that happens to us. Not that we're the Son of God or anything, but when we go to our hometown. If I were to go back to my high school, which doesn't even exist anymore. It was in West Germany on an Air Force base which has since been closed since the end of the Cold War. But if I were to go back to my old high school and say that I am a minister now, my friends would probably fall off their chairs laughing. And how many of us, when we go home, for a weekend, for Christmas, whatever, are perceived to be, not the people we are now, but we are perceived as the 8-year-old kid or the 12-year-old kid. And sometimes we may have to play a role, we may have to revert back to that time in childhood when we were who our families expect us to be now. I hope you don't have to do that. I hope they accept who you are now. But sometimes I think some people have to do that because they say, "Who are you? You're nobody special. You have a PhD? Whoopy do! We remember you when you dirtied your diaper. You're nobody special." I wonder how many of us that happens to. How many of us aren't accepted by our families for who we are now, the way Jesus' boyhood neighbors couldn't accept who he was?

God changes us for the better. God changed Abram. God changed Abram to Abraham. God told Abraham, "You're going to be the father of all the nations." All the nations. I think this was God's third attempt to tell us that we're all brothers and sisters. We're all descendants of Abraham. We didn't catch it the first time, I don't think, when it says in Genesis that God created humankind in God's image and God blessed us. In other words, we're all children of God. But I don't think we got it that time. And I don't think we get it when, I think we fail to realize, that we're all descendants of Adam and Eve. We're all brothers and sisters because Adam and Eve are our ancestors. So God tried one more time, I think, to tell us that we're all brothers and sisters. So God changed Abram to Abraham and said, "You are the father of all the nations."

So we are again all brothers and sisters. We are all one. Whether we are born in America or Canada or Mexico or Europe or Africa or Asia, we are all brothers and sisters. And I think God continues to try to convince us of that, in hopes, I think, that we'll stop fighting each other, so we'll stop going to war with each other, so we'll realize that, yes, we're descendants of Abraham, we're all brothers and

sisters. Yes, we're descendants of Adam and Eve, we're all brothers and sisters. Yes, we're created by God, we're all brothers and sisters. Because I think that God really does, one day, want us all to achieve, "Peace on earth, good will toward all." And we just have to embrace the change that we're all one.

Bill Buckley hated change. The late conservative writer, who founded National Review back in the fifties. I remember reading that, when he founded that magazine, he wanted to say to History, "Stop!" But of course History didn't stop. Time marches on, as they say.

Bill Buckley didn't succeed in stopping History, in stopping progress, in stopping change. But what if he had?

What if he had? Would we still have separate drinking fountains in different parts of the country? Would we never have seen the passage of the voting rights act? The civil rights act? In Bill Buckley's defense, he did eventually come around to accepting some change. He championed Martin Luther King Day. He realized that he had to change. That we are all brothers and sisters. Liberals and conservatives. We are all brothers and sisters.

The Pope has changed. He keeps changing almost every day. Maybe you saw the most recent change. A day or two ago, the Pope said that the Catholic church has to be more accepting of people who are divorced and that it would be up to individual Catholic churches to decide whether divorced people can take communion. Now some of us may wish the Pope would change even more over several other issues, but he keeps changing. He seems to know how much the Catholic church can change without people going crazy (or without somebody poisoning his food, I suppose).

Why is it so difficult for religions to change? I don't know. Maybe it's because a lot of religions have scripture, sacred scripture, that's thousands of years old. And they want to live up to that scripture, they want to live out that scripture. Take Christianity and the Bible. People want to believe that every word in the Bible is true, is inerrant. But even Jesus changed the Bible, said you didn't have to pay attention to everything in the Bible, especially hateful stuff. Jesus didn't kill the adulterous woman, even though that's what the scriptures say he should have done. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, even though Scripture said you shouldn't do that. Jesus said it doesn't matter what goes into your mouth, even though that's what Scripture said, he said what matters is what comes out of your mouth because what comes out of your mouth comes from your heart. Jesus said it was OK for the disciples to go through the fields and eat grain on the Sabbath, even though the Scriptures say you're not supposed to do anything on the Sabbath. Jesus basically said that love supersedes the Scriptures. I used to say, "Love trumps the Scriptures," but that's changed to "Love supersedes the Scriptures." But it's hard. It's hard for religions to change.

This church has to change. I have to change. When I came to this church a year and half ago, there were "No Trespassing" signs in the Peace Garden. And elsewhere on the property. And I said, "Why are there 'No Trespassing' signs in the Peace Garden?" I was told it was to keep the homeless out. I was like, "What? We can't have that." So I tore down the "No Trespassing" signs. And I put up a sign that said, "Peace Garden Open for Prayer 24/7" and we allowed homeless people to sleep in our church and on our property. And we've done that for about a year and a half. But now we have no homeless living in our church or on our property. We had to change. I had to change. It became apparent that we weren't empowering the homeless to move their lives forward. We were enabling the homeless to stay where they were. There were fights that broke out. There were drugs that were bought and sold and people shooting up in the Peace Garden. Finally, we had to change. Friday I went to the Police Department and said we need to have an order that says homeless people can't be on our property. So the police have an order now, again, to run the homeless people off. It breaks my heart.

I preached a sermon a year ago saying we allow the homeless here because we're a church, not a social club. Well I still believe we're a church, not a social club. I'm going to see the city manager this week and talk with him about how we've gotten rid of the homeless, but what can we do, as a church, what can the city do to help the homeless? And I don't mean point them in the direction of Temecula or Riverside. How can we help the homeless? We are a church, not a social club. So

that's my goal from now on, to figure out what we as a church and what the city can do for the homeless. These are human beings. These are human beings. These are children of God. These are our brothers and sisters. And even though they can't sleep on our property any more, even though they can't spend all day on our property any more, we have to figure out what we can do with them. We have to change. Maybe we have to change the city. So I had to embrace change. This church has had to embrace change. And I know a lot of people have wanted that change. And now it's happened and now I hope we'll continue to figure out how to help the homeless.

I saw a poster recently about change. It's the kind of poster I would have had in my dorm room many moons ago. It said something like, "God changes caterpillars into butterflies, sand into pearls, coal into diamonds. God does that through time and pressure. And God is changing you, too."

How is God changing you? How is God trying to change you from a caterpillar into a butterfly? From sand into a pearl? From coal into a diamond? How is God changing you? Is God changing you the way Jesus changed Saul into Paul? The way God changed Abram into Abraham? Are you embracing that change? Because you can't run away from it. You can't run away from the way God wants to change you. God will keep hunting you down. God hunted me down for forty years until I became a minister. How is God trying to change you for the better? And are you embracing that change? I hope you are.

Let us pray:

God of love, help us to embrace change.

Help us to become the people that you want us to be.

Now and forevermore.

By the power of the Holy Spirit

And in the name of Jesus.

Amen.