

WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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I don't know about you, but sometimes lately I find it hard to believe I have only been here at BUC for a year. That skewed perception is, I believe, the result of going through so many changes with you in a short space of time, significant changes that would seem to require longer time to happen, and probably do require a longer time to assimilate. Walk in the church office these days, and it looks nothing like the office of a year ago, with new faces at many desks, or familiar faces in new roles at other desks. Look around the congregation, and notice the people you have yet to meet, the absences of those who are no longer with us. Even our physical space has changed its appearance in these past twelve months, from repairs, from new décor, from rearrangement of existing décor.

While these changes are likely welcome for some of you and troubling for others of you, they are the inevitable result of calling a new minister (so feel free to blame them on me). Like most ministers starting out with new congregations, I came here eager to have us embark on a whole new way of doing church, to remake ourselves, to become a church unlike any seen before, and particularly to become a church unlike the church you had been

before. That motivation did *not* stem from any negative judgment I harbored about the church you had been; on the contrary, much of my desire to serve you grew from admiration for who BUC has been over the course of your existence.

But admiration notwithstanding, I have been pressing for us to break from the past, to change directions, to reinvent ourselves, because I have believed that a new orientation is necessary for us to grow and thrive, and also because I am eager to put my own stamp on this congregation, to make you identifiable as the church that Kathy Hurt is serving.

An egotistical motive, I have to admit, and an all-to-common tactic of new ministers when they arrive on the scene, acting as though the church had not truly existed before they rode into town. Ministers forget repeatedly that *we* are the ones who come and go, while it is the *congregation* that remains, that lasts beyond any one minister, any one exciting new program, any one transformation in mission and outreach. And to act otherwise, to dismiss the history and the congregation that has gone before and will abide after, does a disservice to a church, its traditions—and its faith.

The promise of making all things new comes whenever a transition in leadership happens, and in fact is the impetus for making the transition in many cases. Whether we are changing ministers or mayors, presidents of

the local parent-teacher association or presidents of the country, the eagerness to move beyond a present state of affairs that has grown intolerable because of pain or stagnation or ineffectiveness or boredom shapes our choice for the next leader. And those seeking to lead shape their messages of change accordingly. Only when the transition is an unwilling one, brought about by external circumstances such as an untimely death or forced resignation or relocation, are we likely to hear promises of keeping things the same.

Even without a change in ministers, BUC would be a place filled with the desire for change, for a break from the past, because we tend to attract individuals who may come from less than satisfying spiritual backgrounds. The disconnection is marked in statements of identity, as we say “I used to be Catholic” or “I left the Lutheran church” or “I’m a recovering fundamentalist.” Sometimes simply a word or gesture that seems reminiscent of the church left behind is enough to elicit a negative reaction.

Breaking with the past, rejecting the past, as having no value for the present and no part in the future: it is a style so typical of our country and culture, with our beginnings in a revolt against our home country, with our preference for all things youthful and our uneasiness with age. It is a style that marks liberal congregations of all sorts with our eagerness to embrace

the latest trend, the most progressive idea. And it is a style that can be the undoing of healthy spiritual growth.

One of the patterns that appears in the development of many religious traditions involves the challenge to return to what was essential, what was considered the true core of the tradition. Prophets and teachers do sometimes challenge people to head off in a new direction, but just as often, perhaps more often, challenge people to remember where they came from and go back to that place, that perspective. Sometimes the challenge is one of repentance, and we are called to turn back to God and a set of primary teachings; sometimes the challenge is one of remembering and rediscovering a truth we once knew but have forgotten or lost. In either case, the point is the same: go back, turn back, head back, look back, and set things right once more. The spiritual wellbeing of individuals and communities is threatened, it seems, where memory fails and the past is forgotten. To use traditional language, faith is rooted in remembering. To remember is to remain strong in faith; to forget is to lose faith. In a culture such as ours, so focused on what comes next, the notion is an odd one; with our tendency to experience faith itself as future directed, as looking hopefully forward towards a time when life will be better and our situation will improve, as we encourage one another to “have faith”, locating faith in the past and in

memory may not make much sense. Even more problematic is the possibility that the past and its memories are not positive or reassuring ones, when the past, particularly in terms of spirituality, was a time of harsh judgment, of shaming, of being told what to believe and being scolded for asking questions, of learning that humans are unworthy in the sight of God. Who wants to remember a past like that? Just as we may be eager to forget the past few years under some leadership when it comes time to vote, so we may be eager to set aside the past few years of our spiritual experience. Yet if faith comes at least in part from remembering, what happens to our faith when the memories are not preserved and recalled lovingly, but rejected, cast aside like any other unwanted possession?

BREAK

While we tend to hear, and may agree, that change is hard for everyone, even the most flexible and forward-thinking among us, that observation is not entirely accurate. Change is not, in and of itself, hard; rather, it is the inevitable loss that accompanies change which can be hard for us to deal with. When change happens, whether small or large, something which was there—a person, a way of living, a belief or a dream, a kind of church—goes away to make room for the new. What we struggle with is coming to terms

with the disappearance part of the change process. To be willing to change, whatever we are changing, means being willing to accept loss.

Think of changes you have experienced in your own life over the past year, whether desired or unwelcome. What did you lose as that change unfolded? For me, this past year of my life brought a change in the congregation I served, a most welcome change indeed—but it also meant saying goodbye to some people I had come to love in my previous congregation. The change in ministry also necessitated a change in where I live, again a welcome change—and a loss of a kind of easy, unhurried lifestyle that I had enjoyed in the small town in Ohio where I lived. More recently, I navigated a difficult and emotionally complex change as I left my long-time partner, a change that I believe had become necessary for me and probably necessary for her as well—but a change that brought a host of losses for both of us, loss of shared experiences and possessions, loss of familiar companionship, loss of a future we had planned together. All these changes were ones I sought, and all came with the price of losing something or someone valuable.

If the difficult aspect of the change process is about loss, then it makes sense to see that resistance to change is not about the change itself, but about the loss that will accompany the change. And any one of us, by virtue of

being human, will dig in our heels when facing the prospect of losing something, whether the loss is desirable or feared, in our best interests or threatening to our interests. So in order to navigate change in a healthy manner, our challenge is to learn how to manage the loss we will undergo.

For this congregation, that means doing a careful discernment of what is worth keeping, what must be kept at all costs, and what can be set aside, let go. And while the initial answer, especially if you find BUC at present a mighty fine place to be where, like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, all the people are friendly, the children all above average, and the place easy on the eyes, might be "don't change anything," which actually means "we aren't willing to let go of anything," such a position ultimately cannot be sustained. We may opt to remain unchanging, but the community around us will shift, our own lives will bring unavoidable changes, and a stagnant and unchanging church in the midst of surrounding movement and change cannot be the support and safe harbor we seek. In the same fashion, once any of us has put together a life, a career, a home we enjoy, we may then hang onto it at all costs, unwilling to change because how could something else be better. But all we accomplish with such resistance is losing the opportunity to choose how we will change and instead end up in the position of having change foisted upon us, without any choice on our part.

The changes we choose, the changes we long for, the changes we long to avoid, the changes that come without warning, unwelcome: we navigate them as best we can, sometimes gracefully, sometimes stumbling and falling and holding on to whatever we can grasp to keep from falling even farther. Faith can help, the faith that has its basis in memory, where we recall what served us well before, how we survived upheaval the last time around. A spiritual community can help, where others are available to support us when we cannot support ourselves. And trust in that interdependent web of existence we affirm in our seventh principle, a foundation that ultimately supports us, will carry us through the currents of change. Or, if you prefer to sing it: “Love will guide us, peace has tried us, hope inside us, will lead the way. . . . Love will guide us through the dark night.”