

A sermon preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Danvers, MA

Date: November 18, 2018

Rev. Kevin M. Smith, Pastor

Exodus 32:1-14

Change Will Do Us Good

Most of us have probably heard the phrase, “God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.” A few days ago I was looking at a website from another church and they proclaimed that “Jesus was the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.” They were quoting Hebrews 13:8. Also, in the Hebrew Scripture book of Malachi it reads, “For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. (Mal. 3:6)” And texts like 1 Samuel 15:29, we hear, “Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.” Well, okay? What we are hearing here folks are scriptures that argue for the immutability or an unchanging God. I wonder how you feel about worshipping a God or serving a God that supposedly never changes?

There must be something really comforting about a God who is unchanging. You know if you “Google” the word “unchanging” you are going to get a lot of websites with pictures of clouds and material about the unchanging God. Now, why clouds are such a common symbol for an unchanging God’s really baffles me, because if anything changes shape more often than clouds I’m not sure what it is. Weird.

Another well-worn phrase is that “change is hard.” I think for a lot of us the past couple of years has been a difficult time of change for our nation. It’s a whole new world when it comes to so many things going on in our culture and government.

Change is difficult. Transitions are hard. Heaven knows all churches go through changes. Churches always have it rough when faced with change. New pastors, new lay leaders, new ideas, new theological arguments, and the biggest one of all of course—new carpets are really hard to face! By the way, when someone told me they wanted to change the color of the carpets in church that’s when I decided to retire!! (That’s a joke folks!)

How about these poor murmuring former Egyptian slaves following Moses around in the desert? Moses goes up the mountain to chat with God and when he doesn’t come down in the time the people think is enough they want to change their god. Any golden calf will do—Aaron, the conflict avoider par excellence, sees to that and melts down all the gold watches to create a golden calf. Now, the one true God, gets wind of this and tells Moses that some smiting is about to begin. Let’s just say that Elohim is none to pleased with these fickle and impatient people and wants to teach them a pretty hard lesson. I think God said something to the effect that they would be eaten or consumed. A whole lot of wrath was coming down.

Folks, it seems like the only time we want things to change are when times are tough and we're not getting our way or life is just too hard and we pray for something to change. When times are good and life is easy and relationships are smooth the last thing we want is change.

My friends, we all know that change is going to happen no matter what we do to stop it or stem the tide of it. The only sure thing in the world is that changes will happen. *It can happen to us or happen with us.* We can ignore it, fight it, repress it, sweep it under the carpet (no matter what color it is), rebel against it, but the one immutable force in this world is change and we all know it sooner or later.

We can choose how we react to change. We can get angry like the God of Moses on the mountain who wanted to consume Moses' clan with angry wrath.

I find it fascinating that so many Christians and people of faith down throughout history and even today still think that God is immutable and doesn't change. We can even read in our scriptures how Moses was able to change the mind of God and prevent the consuming wrath of God to smite his followers. We even read this morning that the "Lord changed his (sic) mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people," as it says in our passage from Exodus. Do we worship a static unchanging God or a dynamic God? *What kind of God do you want to worship—a God of unchanging force or a force for change in the world?*

Look, we all want the love and generosity and merciful *nature* of this force we call God to stay the same. Even me, this progressive liberal Christian, does not want that nature of God to change. And maybe that's what all these fundamentalist Christian websites are talking about when they say that God and Jesus are unchanging—maybe they are talking about *the unchanging nature of God's love*. If so, we have something to agree upon. Somehow, though, when I hear about their views on our changing society or our modern ways I kind of doubt it. When social structures change, even when those changes are to the benefit of fairness, justice, mercy, and forgiveness we often see a lot of resistance to social change coming out of our fundamentalist mega-church pulpits.

I guess our ideas about a God who can change, who is not immutable, really derive from what we want from God. I hope, my friends, that we want a God that grows with us, that helps us grow in our complexity of thinking and facing the hard challenges of living in today's world. I hope we really want a God who can do new things in our lives to move beyond the burdens of our childhoods and hard times that have boxed us in to patterns of destructive behaviors. I hope the reign of God in our lives is all about changing us, molding and making us beings that more represent that unchanging loving nature of God's love in our relationships with one another here at church and out in the daily walk of our lives. I believe the change will do us good. But, be careful about proposing a change in the color of the carpets! Amen.

