

“A New Thing” – Stephanie Wing, 3.21.10

Recently a group from our church went to see "The Church Basement Ladies." The entire play is set in the basement of a Swedish Lutheran church in a small town in Minnesota in the mid-1960s. The youngest character, Singe, has just gone off to college in the Twin Cities. As she comes home for school breaks and other special occasions, she brings a new air into the kitchen, which is run quite closely by the kitchen matriarch, Mrs. Snustad, who has no desire to see any more changes come to her beloved church. The Church Basement Ladies remember together the upheaval caused by moving from the Black Hymnal to the Red Hymnal, even as the church is experiencing similar tensions between the older traditions of the church and the new things that are beginning to happen.

It was probably around that same time that our church moved to the Red Hymnal, still in the pews, that was published in 1954. This was also a period of new growth in this church - a new building project that gave us the offices and classrooms that we still have today. The Corning plant was humming, and as I've heard, it brought many young families to settle here, most of whom were either Catholic or Presbyterian. Back then, if you grew up Presbyterian and moved to a new town, then of course you went to the Presbyterian Church. Our rooms were full, our pews were full, and even a new hymnal could be tolerated!

Many of you here today remember how things used to be. Perhaps there is a desire to rebuild or restore what was once a reality but now only a memory. Of course we all have a tendency towards selective memory, and probably tend to gild our memories and refer to golden ages of the past. We do this in our churches, and we do this in our lives. Remember those days when everyone was in church on Sunday morning? No more! Remember those days when everyone was involved in Sunday school? No more! Remember the days when children grew up with the stories of the Bible, when if you were born a Presbyterian you were Presbyterian for life, and when church participation was a cultural priority? No more!

We could go on and on about how things have changed, but both our readings from Isaiah and Philippians tell us not to look back. This passage from Isaiah was written to the Jews at the end of the Babylonian exile. Think of the older generation in that group, perhaps the ones who remembered a bit about what life in their own homeland had been - before the exile, before the destruction of the Temple and the rest of Jerusalem. Those are the voices we hear in Psalm 126, celebrating the restoration of Zion. The younger generation born in exile only knew living in Babylon. Of course they heard stories of Jerusalem, and the golden years of the Israelites, but they had no experience of it. As conquering empires went, the Babylonian Empire was quite benevolent. The exiles were allowed many freedoms and opportunities in Babylon, and many, especially those who knew

nothing else, were probably quite content to stay, rather than giving up everything they had to go to a land they did not know to start the difficult task of rebuilding.

For both generations, the message not to consider the things of old is an important one. If the exiled generation expected to return to Jerusalem and return to the way things were before Babylonian conquest, they were in for sure disappointment. And if the next generation, those born in exile who had made Babylon home, expected to go to Judah and have the same kind of lifestyle, opportunities, and conveniences they had known, they were in for a wake-up call. New realities call for new expectations, and for changes. God says, "See, I am about to do a new thing!" Don't expect it to be the same as before; that was then, and this is now.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says that he is forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. What lies behind him? An impeccable church resume. In terms of his personal piety, he could boast of everything that was of any value - his birth, his heritage, his education, and his role in leadership. Paul's life and accomplishments would have made any Jewish mother proud. But Paul's entire perspective has changed. The things he once counted as gain - the things that once held supreme value - he now counted as loss. He is no longer interested in pursuing religion as usual. He instead is striving for the new goal, pressing on to the new thing that God is doing in Jesus Christ.

On one hand, newness sounds like a good thing. It is clear to most, if not all of us that we need some new life, new members, and new growth in our church. On the other hand, doesn't newness mean change? And change can be scary, uncomfortable, and quite difficult. How often, when presented an opportunity for change, are we tempted to decline? "A new thing? Oh, that's nice, but no, thank you, I think I'll just stick with my old thing. It works just fine and I am already comfortable with it." This is a church that prides itself on tradition. And there is much to be proud of in our church's history. There is also much to be said for respecting the traditions and history of the church, Presbyterian and universal. But just as Paul looks back on his past pedigree with a new perspective of what is really valuable, so we too must examine our traditions, the things we have always done and valued, with a new perspective.

The fact is, the world today is very different than it was 50 years ago. What worked as church and met needs 50 years ago might be totally different today. One of the biggest changes is that most people don't go to church by default, because that is what is expected or what people just do. There are also many more adults today who did not grow up in the church than there were 50 years ago. Think about that for a few minutes. Imagine that you had never stepped foot in a church. What would make you go? You probably wouldn't do it on your own; perhaps only at the invitation of a friend or co-worker would you enter this foreign

land. Then what would your experience be? You would be surrounded by people who all know the script - who know when to stand and sit (most of the time, at least!), people who don't need to look at the bulletin to recite this strange creed that uses words like "sitteth" and "thence." You might struggle to follow these strange and unfamiliar hymns, like "Amazing Grace" and "Be Thou My Vision."

Remember - all hymns are strange and unfamiliar to some people. Why would you come to any church? Why come here? And why would you bother coming back?

What would someone "get out" of our service, or out of coming to church in general? Hopefully this church is meeting the needs of its members, but what about the needs of those who are not here? Do we know what those needs are? Do we know the needs of our members who aren't coming to church? What about the needs of those in the community who are unchurched - who either don't have a church home or have never had a church home? How is our ministry in this church a relevant one? Asking these questions might make us uncomfortable. After all, people shouldn't come to church because of what they get out of it, right? They should come because it is the right thing to do. But that's really not how things work anymore.

The gospel is still relevant - perhaps more today than it ever has been - but the culture in which we are called to minister is new and different. To maintain a relevant ministry, we need to be able to respond in new and different ways, too.

God is about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it? Church business as usual will become increasingly less relevant and less effective. We need to forget what lies behind and press forward to what lies ahead. We need to do some serious discernment as a church to see where God is calling us today. And we need to pray that we will be open vessels for the Holy Spirit to use in ministry.

Change and growth are never easy, but they are facts of life. We are constantly adapting to changes in our lives. But perhaps this church has been a haven from the tumultuous change that surrounds us. Perhaps we have found comfort in coming and knowing what to expect each week, in knowing that whatever changes out there, what is in here is safely protected from change. While the church is meant to be a safe place in many ways, it was never meant to be a haven or retreat from the world. When God moves among the people, things really get shaken up. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, things got downright Pentecostal, and the church was never the same again. When Jesus came to worship in the temple and turned over the exchange tables, it created quite the stir.

God's truth is eternal. The message is still the same, but the medium keeps changing. The early church was planted in house churches. When Constantine established Christianity as a state religion, there was a period of great change and growth. The Reformation brought sweeping changes to the church in every area, even worship. Services were no longer in Latin, but in the vernacular. Music was

different. Preaching was different. Everything changed. Think of how radio, television, and now the internet have all had impacts on what it means to be church. We might not like all of it, but we can't ignore how powerful those mediums have become.

The motto of the Reformation was "Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda," meaning "the church reformed, and always being reformed." That doesn't mean that the new is better than the old. It doesn't mean that we should constantly be changing the church to keep up with the times. It doesn't mean that we are responsible for initiating the change. The Latin verb is passive, meaning that we are to be reformed not by ourselves, but by God through the Holy Spirit. This motto recognizes that God is constantly at work in the world and in the church. The church is not static but dynamic, and we must remember that in our ministry.

There is a lot happening in our church that is great, and that is very relevant. But there are some areas where we might need to grow in new ways. Are we ready for the new thing that God is about to do? Can we honor our past, cherish our traditions, but also be ready to be reformed and reshaped through the Holy Spirit? I am not sure what that will look like. None of us knows. After all, it is a new thing! But as long as we are straining for what lies ahead, pressing towards the prize of the call of Jesus Christ, and allowing ourselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, if we follow where God leads us, we will not go astray.