“If Change is So Good, Why Don’t YOU Go First?”
(a sermon based on Jeremiah 29:11-14, page 731 in the Old Testament NSRV pew Bible)

by

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I’m sure you’ve heard that “Things Change.” In our own lives, we have all experienced many changes. We change as we grow up, and change again as we grow older. Our bodies change, our relationships with our parents change; perhaps we move away from our home, we change jobs, we marry and divorce. Friends and family members die. Things will always change. We don’t have much choice about that, but we do have a choice on how we react to change. In short, it comes down to whether we manage change as it occurs, or whether it manages us.

One of the ministers at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Long Beach, Rev. Anna Olson, in an article reacting to recent transitions within their congregation (“A Word From Anna”, St. Luke’s PEOPLE Newsletter, Sept., 2009, page 3), wrote: “Change is hard, especially when we fear that change is more about someone else’s needs than our own.” Let me say that again: “Change is hard, especially when we fear that change is more about someone else’s needs than our own.” Rev. Anna nailed it for me with that remark.

If we sense that the new “thing” that is happening to us is appropriate to our stage in life -- a developmental phase that one must go through as one matures, a growth spurt, or a life transition -- that puts us on the next level, we see its value and appreciate the changes that are entailed as we mature. These are changes we anticipate for our own good, we may even welcome them.
But if the change is being forced upon us for other reasons -- perhaps to suit other people’s tastes, or to “keep up with the Jonses”…

…or perhaps your partner desires what you do not, or your parents have laid down the law and decided something for you -- we may easily resent that “imposition.” Change is much harder to accept when we sense that it will not meet our need, but is coming at us because of someone else’s need.

When I read Rev. Olson’s words, I said: “Ahah!” That may be why the efforts of the 9-AM-worship folks (here at Seaside Community Church) to re-focus & revise the 10:30-worship service has met with such resistance. The people who enjoy the later more traditional worship service feel no urgency to change. It’s not their desire to use “power-point projected” words and visuals on the screen, nor to put down their hymnals so that their hands are free to be raised in praise or to clap in time with an up-beat song. Not them!

Is it hard to believe that the choir enjoys wearing matching robes as they sing complicated harmonies instead of every song sung in unison? Some folks really enjoy (and find meaning) in old-fashioned liturgical formulae like the Gloria Patri and the Doxology. Some of us like “introits” & “responses,” “Preludes” and “Postludes” rather than simple “gathering music” and a peppy “walking-out song.” Who’s preferences should dictate the terms of worship?

Rev. Anna Olson says that change is harder “when we fear that change is more about someone else’s needs than our own.” Reflecting on transitions that her own congregation is going through, Rev. Olson writes: “I sense a deeper undercurrent of anxiety and sadness about change. In a relationship with a parish, each of us carries the memory of the church as we found it; the ways it met the needs of our lives when we arrived and decided to stay. Our lives shift over the years, but as the church changes, it is natural to wonder if the change is about OUR needs, or if we are caught up in some developmental process that is NOT about US.”

Four years ago, when we began the early service, it was because (like last Sunday) the sanctuary at the traditional Sunday morning worship hour was overly full! Last week we had 87 people in a room that should seat 120,
but folks sitting on the aisle would not *scootch over* to let late-comers in, several front pews were left open for the choir, five or six people in a pew felt *tight enough* without squeezing in the fire-marshall’s average of eight bodies.

The Leadership Council had to decide: either *enlarge the sanctuary* by knocking out a wall and adding to the seating space, or *offer an alternative second worship service.* Most folks liked the intimacy of a small sanctuary, and nearly everyone agreed that we didn’t have the *financial wherewithal* to engage a capital campaign to enlarge the sanctuary. Adding an early service made financial and logistical sense. When we began, it was a “clone” of the second service, except without the choir & children’s time; no Sunday school.

Folks that came *early* liked the fact that their day was underway at an hour similar to their workweek schedule; they didn’t have to wait around until *after 11:00 in the morning* to *get started* on their weekend projects or sports.

Folks that came early *didn’t miss* the absence of the anthem nor the long announcements at the start of worship, and the *extra time saving* could be put into more *praise songs* and a sermon that often included *comments,* even *dia-log.* During the year that *Christian Brost* was with us, and the following year with the *Rev. Marcia Free,* we held those early services in the *sanctuary* with the same bulletin that I produced for the *second* service. As I said: a “clone.”

But as time passed, some of the folks at the early service wanted more *informality* in the sermon, and less complicated *Calls to Worship & Morning Prayers* such as I write in the bulletin. They wanted a different kind of *up-beat song,* with more *repetitive and singable melodies,* instead of the four or five verses of *story-telling lyrics* that constitute traditional church “hymns.” They wanted to bring their coffee into the *worship space,* and they wanted *DVD’s and music-videos,* and other visual aids projected on the screen.

The assumption was, first, that people who liked more *contemporary evangelical* “mega-church” worship styles would find our early service to their liking. With *on-going refreshments* provided, *far less reading* required in the service, and with “*hands-free*” *singing,* their hope was that *young*
people -- and those adults whose tastes in worship are “almost pentecostal” -- would try out Seaside Community Church and, perhaps, join us. To make these changes more easily, we moved the early service from the sanctuary to the Church House two years ago. We call it our “Jump Start” service: “Get a jump start to your week. Come early, the coffee will be ready."

Frankly, those many “un-churched” people who (we assumed) were looking for an early Sunday morning worship service, never materialized. The early service stayed small: between one dozen or two in attendance. Those who come seem to enjoy the “tweaks” we’ve done over the years to “fine tune” the worship service to the tastes of those members who like informality. Most recently, in response to people who have said they would enjoy the early service style, but not quite so early on Sunday morning, we moved the time to 9 AM. We are done at 10 AM, so people can still get on with their activities.

The dozen or so core members who come at 9:00 AM have created a consistently enjoyable, somewhat informal, but visually inspiring worship experience. Many new songs have been introduced through that medium. But here’s the rub: when those songs and visuals have been imported to the 10:30 service, they either fall flat or create active dissonance. The faithful fourty or so who come every Sunday to the second service “miss” the members who come early. “We’ve broken up the family,” says one. “We’ve split the church,” says another. “There are not enough of us at 10:30 to have a full choir and a Sunday School, and nobody wants to host the later coffee hour.”

You will each receive a survey from from me this week (either by email or by snail mail, if you don’t have a computer) asking for your personal direct feedback about these worship changes, and the dissonance that it has created.

Rev. Anna Olson writes: “Sometimes the development of both parties is in such harmony that change feels like growth, or a blessing, or flowering, or any of the many positive terms we have for change. Other times it feels like we are out of sync, growing apart, rubbing each other raw.”
In a little book by Dallas Brauninger, published by our United Church Press in Cleveland, entitled “Talking With Your Child About CHANGE” (1994, page 3), he writes: “Change occurs continually during our lives. Childhood is the time to develop a positive attitude toward it. People may face large and small changes with anger and fear, or they may learn to accept them with grace, and see beyond them with hope. Our trust in God’s presence helps us to meet change with greater perspective, a perspective based on God’s love.”

So we come back to my original proposal: Things will always change. We don’t have much choice about that, but we do have a choice on how we react to change. It comes down to whether we manage change, or it manages us. In a delightful little book by Dr. Spencer Johnson (co-author with Ken Blanchard of “The One Minute Manager,” the world’s most popular management method) entitled “Who Moved My Cheese?” (G. P. Putnam’s Sons: Penguin Putnam, Inc., New York, 1998) the first two principles for dealing with change in your work (& in your life) are: (1) Change Happens, & (2) Anticipate Change.

Dr. Johnson’s book is dedicated to Robert Burns, the 18th Century Scottish poet who wrote: “The best laid schemes o’ mice and men, aft’ gae aglie” (often go astray). And his preface is a quote from A. J. Cronin: “Life is not a straight and easy corridor along which we travel free and unhampered; but a maze of passages, through which we must seek our way, lost and confused, now and again checked in a blind alley. But always, if we have faith, a door will open for us; not perhaps one that we ourselves would ever have thought of, but one that will ultimately prove good for us.”

When we decide that a change is in order -- for the good and the growth and the future of our endeavor -- that decision on the part of the leaders may be the easiest part. We know that change happens, we anticipate it, and we try to cope with it, to manage it. That’s the leader’s job. But getting our people on board with the prospect of change is much more difficult. That’s because change is an emotional process, tied in to other changes and losses along the way. As Dallas Brauninger reminds us: Childhood is the time to develop a positive attitude toward change. Unfortunately, childhood may be
when we were forced to undergo changes that upset us (maybe even traumatized us), and we seek safety in routine. *We are all creatures of habit,* but *some* folk’s “temperament” is *more at ease & welcoming* of habitual routine than *others.*

Uncharted waters are scary! Boats are always safest in the harbor. But that’s not what boats are made for! *In the long run, repetition & “sameness” is the fast track to mediocrity and irrelevance.* In the book from which I derived today’s sermon title: *“Change is good... You go first”* (by Mac Anderson and Tom Feltenstein, Simple Truths, 2007), the back cover has a quote from Tuli Kupferberg: *“When patterns are broken, new worlds emerge.”*

When patterns are broken, we may be upset. We may become angry. We may want things “back” the way they were. We may be unsettled, uncomfortable, on edge, or defensive. But if we want *the new world* to emerge, some old patterns may *need* to be broken. And that’s the challenge for both our *Leadership Council* and the members who attend the *two* “competing” worship services: to convince ourselves as a whole, as a single “team”, that *the new world we are trying to create in Jesus’ name* is better than the one we’re in (of whichever style or flavor is to our taste).

Is it easy? Of course not! It takes *communication* – better communication, apparently, than we have had on this topic in the past – and it takes *planning*, personal commitment, and *patience*. I suppose it also takes some courage, if we are among those who personally prefer *tradition* and *familiar routine*. Upsetting “how we’ve *always* done it” and introducing *new* patterns may drive some folks away, looking for another little old-line church (like we “used to be”) who have not “bought into” the innovations of the 21st Century.

But the truth is, that *change can be a wonderful gift.* It may be *the key* that unlocks doors to growth & excitement, to church renewal & spiritual revival. But it means we may need to get out of our comfort zones. We need to *monitor the changes as we go through them* so that we can *adapt* quickly and appropriately. Even though we may find ourselves *on a new path,* we need to be reassured that *it’s the right path,* for the right reasons, *our* reasons.
Today’s reading from the prophet Jeremiah addressed the defeated Jews in exile in Babylon, but I believe it fits any person who has become dislocated to their core by bad news, upset by forces of change over which they had no control, distressed by changes that have gone against their personal good fortune. Jeremiah says to the exiles in their bleakest hour, that God has a plan:

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future and a hope. Then when you call upon me, and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart. I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes, … and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”

(Jeremiah 29:11-14)

Dr. Johnson’s book outlines a healthy approach to change through a parable in which two mice and two little people search for, and find, cheese. Now “cheese” is “a metaphor for what we want to have in life,” he writes, “whether it is a job, a relationship, more money, a big house, freedom, health, recognition, spiritual peace…” anything we are willing to search for and to strive after. “Each of us has our own idea of what Cheese is,” he writes, “and we pursue it because we believe it makes us happy. If we get it, we often become attached to it; and if we lose it, or it’s taken away, it can be traumatic.”

Now, defeat in war and dislocation of the population into exile (such as Jeremiah was addressing in the Bible text) is a far more traumatic change than almost anything that will have happened to us. And searching for God -- seeking with all our heart the restoration of our hope and our future -- as God promises in the text, is a much more noble pursuit that any of the examples of “cheese” in Dr. Spencer’s book. The relative “triviality” of the changes we are going through (in our personal lives or in our church), when contrasted to the Jewish tragedy that Jeremiah laments, pales by comparison.

Nevertheless, I ask you to indulge me for a few minutes, as we imagine together the story of the two mice and the two little men who seek for their
Cheese through the Maze of their lives. Dr. Johnson explains that: “the ‘Maze’ in the story represents where you spend your time looking for what you want. It can be the organization you work in, the community you live in, or the relationships you have in your life.” (page 14) The dilemma that drives the story forward is apparent in the book’s title: “Who Moved My Cheese?”

The two mice are named “Sniff” and “Scurry” and they tend to keep things simple. They sniff the air to locate the cheese, and they scurry up and down the corridors of the Maze until they find it. When the cheese is moved, they notice the change, and they promptly sniff and scurry their way again through the Maze until they locate a new stash of different cheeses. Got it?

The two little people, named “Hem” and “Haw” have much more complex human brains, and their human emotions further complicate things. As you hear what the four characters do, both the simple & the complex, you can decide which reactions best represent parts of you when faced with change. Sometimes it is to our advantage to do the simplest things, but… we don’t.

As different as mice & little people are in real life, in the story they shared some things in common. Every morning they would put on their jogging suits and running shoes, leave their little homes, and race out through the Maze looking for their favorite Cheese. It was a labyrinth of corridors and chambers, some of which contained pockets of delicious Cheese. But there were also dark corners and blind alleys leading nowhere. It was easy to get lost, but, for those who found their way, the Maze held secrets that let them enjoy a better life.

To make a long story short, the mice, Sniff & Scurry, used the simple trial-and-error method of finding cheese: they ran down one corridor, and if it proved to be empty, they turned and ran down another. They remembered which corridors held no cheese and quickly went into new areas. Sniff would smell out the general direction, using his great nose; Scurry would race ahead, sometimes going in the wrong direction, sometimes bumping into walls, but after a while, they found their way. Hem & Haw, using more sophisticated methods, their ability to think, but also clouded occasionally with emotions that took over and made the Maze more challenging, also found their Cheese.
Every morning after that, the mice and the little people dressed in their running gear and headed over to where they knew the Cheese was to be found. When they arrived, they took off their running shoes and enjoyed their cheese. But after a while, a different routine set in for the little people. Each day Hem and Haw would wake up a little later, dress a little slower, and walk to their Cheese. After all, they now knew where it was and how to get there. They had no idea where the Cheese came from, or who put it there, they just assumed it would always be there, new every morning. They settled in, made themselves at home, put away their jogging suits and put on their slippers. They were becoming very comfortable with the routine. In time, they moved their houses closer to the Cheese and built a social life around it. They decorated the walls with sayings, such as: “Having Cheese makes you happy.”

One morning, when Sniff & Scurry arrived at the Cheese Station, they discovered there was no Cheese. They weren’t surprised, because they had noticed that the supply had been getting smaller every day when they arrived; they were prepared for the inevitable. They knew instinctively what to do. Instead of taking off their running shoes, they laced them a bit tighter, looked out into the Maze, and (with a sniff) went off in search of New Cheese.

Later that same day, when Hem and Haw arrived at the Cheese Station, they were unprepared for what they saw. “What? No Cheese?” yelled Hem, thinking that if he yelled loud enough, someone would put the Cheese back where it belonged. “Who moved my Cheese?” he hollered. Hands on his hips, face turning red, he said: “It’s not fair!” Haw just stood there, frozen with shock. He just was not ready for this. They had not been paying attention to the small changes that had been taking place every day, so they had taken it for granted that “their” Cheese would always be there for them.

Haw knew that Hem was yelling something, but he just didn’t want to deal with it; so he just tuned everything out. They took a long time trying to decide what had happened, who had moved the cheese, and what to do about
it. They kept looking around the now cheeseless Cheese Station, to see if the Cheese was really gone. While Sniff and Scurry had quickly moved on, Hem and Haw continued to, well, hem & haw. Hem ranted & raved at the injustice of it all. Haw started to get depressed. They had made future plans based on this Cheese. What would happen if it wasn’t there again tomorrow? No one had warned them. It wasn’t right! It was not the way things were supposed to be! They went home that night hungry, angry, and discouraged. But before they left, Haw wrote on the wall: “The more important your cheese is to you, the more you want to hold on to it.”

The next day Hem and Haw returned to the Cheese Station, where they expected, somehow, to find their Cheese again. But the situation hadn’t changed. Hem analyzed the situation in his human brain, over and over, running the facts (as he knew them) through his complicated belief systems. “Why did they do this to us?” he demanded. “What’s really going on? Who is behind this? Do you think Sniff & Scurry know something we don’t?”

Haw, who had shut his eyes, and put his hands over his ears, just wanted to block everything out. He hoped when he opened his eyes, that things would be back to normal, like they used to be, when all was well…and comfortable. “What would Sniff & Scurry know,” he scoffed, “they’re just simple mice!”

“Maybe they took our Cheese! Look, we didn’t cause this problem. Somebody else did this, and we need to get to the bottom of it!” said Hem.

“Maybe we should just stop analyzing the situation so much and just get going and find some New Cheese,” Haw suggested.

“No, I like it here,” Hem replied. “I’m getting too old for running through the Maze like we used to do. I’m not interested in getting lost and making a fool of myself. Are you?” With that, Haw’s fear of failing returned and he agreed that going out in search of New Cheese wasn’t a good idea. They continued to come to the old Cheese Station, every day, but with less and less enthusiasm as they suffered the effects of having no Cheese. They felt entitled to their Cheese and hurt that someone had moved it! They
were frustrated with the changed situation, and they were becoming angry. They began blaming each other for the weakened condition they were in. Every night they returned home, carrying their worries and frustrations with them.

Meanwhile, over those days while Hem & Haw were trying to decide what to do, waiting for their Cheese to come back to them like it used to be, Sniff & Scurry had gone farther down the Maze, up and down corridors, looking for New Cheese in places where they had never been before. They squealed with delight when they found the biggest store of Cheese the mice had ever seen! Unlike the old Cheese (which was processed Velveeta), the mice had found Swiss cheese with holes in it! Down other corridors, they came upon bright orange Cheddar and American cheeses, Italian mozzarella, and wonderfully creamy French Camembert. Who would have known there were so many possibilities out there? Sure, they ran into a fair share of dead ends, and bumped into a few blind corners, but they also came across hard Dubliner cheese, sometimes soft Feta cheese, and once a whole round of Gouda from Holland. The mice liked the way things had changed -- actually for the good! -- once they had let go and moved on.

Unfortunately, since their Cheese had been moved, Hem & Haw had begun to think there may not be any Cheese in the Maze anywhere. Peering anxiously down the Maze in directions they had never gone, Haw was afraid that if he went out, he might not find his way back. Hem worried that, if any Cheese existed, they might not find it. Such fears were immobilizing them.

If you want to hear the whole story, I encourage you to buy the book. But the point is clear: “If you do not change, you can become extinct.” (page 46) As we reflect on the plight of Hem & Haw, stuck in their old patterns of thinking, we might ask ourselves regarding change: “What would you do, if you were not afraid?” (page 48) And even though we are not sure of our way forward in the “Maze” of life – and it seems that progress is always measured “two steps forward and one step back” – there is something to be said about taking control, rather than simply letting things happen to us. If Sniff and Scurry could move on, so can we!
In the story, the amount of cheese had been getting smaller. It didn’t just disappear overnight. Dr. Johnson writes: “The change probably would not have taken [them] by surprise if [they] had been watching what was happen-ing all along, and if [they] had anticipated change. … [If we] expect change to happen, and look for it, we can trust [our] basic instincts to sense when change is going to occur and be ready to adapt to it.” (page 51)

While it may be natural for people to fear the unknown -- the uncertainty of change -- Dr. Johnson writes: “Sometimes some fear can be good. When you are afraid things are going to get worse if you don’t so something, it can prompt you to action. But it is not good when you are so afraid that it keeps you from doing anything.” (page 49)

By the time Hem & Haw journeyed out into the Maze again, jogging slowly into the unknown, they were afraid that they had waited too long. They hadn’t had any Cheese for so long that they were now weak. It took them longer, and it was more painful than usual, to get through the Maze. They decided that, if they ever got the chance again, they would get out of their comfort zone and adapt to change sooner. It would make things easier. “Better late than never,” said Haw, who had finally gotten over his denial. Hem had to let go of his anger and begin to trust what lay ahead for them. “When you move beyond your fear,” Haw wrote on the wall, “you feel free!”

They began to think about what they could gain instead of what they were losing; what they were moving toward rather than what they were leaving behind. They realized that change could lead to something better.

If they had expected change, rather than wasting time denying the change that had already taken place, they could have gotten out of their “cheeseless state” much sooner. “Old beliefs do not lead you to new cheese,” Haw wrote on the wall. “Noticing small changes early helps you adapt to the bigger changes that are to come.” They realized that when they had been afraid to change, they were holding on to the illusion of their Old Cheese, which was no longer there. So what made them change? The fear of
starving to death! Until there is a real sense of urgency, most folks refuse to change.

The mice kept life simple. They didn’t over-analyze or over-complicate things. (There was no “paralysis of analysis” with Sniff & Scurry.) When the situation changed, and the Cheese had been moved, they changed and moved with it. This little story has made me more aware of the need to keep things simple, to be flexible, and to move quickly.

I, personally, have always said that we need to take “baby steps” when changing things at the Church. But now I’ve come to see that if we do not adapt in time, we might as well not adapt at all. The “urgency” to grow the congregation, or risk extinction, is only now coming through to me. I suspect that it is my own comfort-level with the traditional style of worship, and discomfort with evangelicalism, that has blocked the efforts of some of our Leadership Council for us to more assertively change the second service. My own taste in theology & my own preferences in worship have inhibited our making the changes at the 10:30 service that have been so well-embraced at 9:00 AM.

Like Hem & Haw, you and I may have to admit that the biggest inhibitor to change lies within ourselves… and that nothing gets better until we change.

Rev. Olson, whose Church Newsletter article got me thinking, ends with these words: “Living with change – living through change – takes faith. Faith that God is not finished with us, individually or collectively. Faith that blessings sometimes come in unexpected (even unwanted) ways. Faith that we are part of something that is larger than ourselves, and larger than any given moment. I pray for faith and grace for all of us, for all the changes in our lives.”

Amen.