

Change You Can Believe In

Sermon September 28, 2008 (Proper 21)

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

Do you remember the story by Washington Irving of Rip Van Winkle? Rip Van Winkle went to sleep for twenty years, and literally slept through the American Revolution.

When the stately old Washington Post has banner headlines about it every day, you know that you can't sleep even twenty hours without missing a profound revolution in the way that financial business is done in our nation. And it doesn't take presidential campaign ads to convince us about the need for change.

The *rapidity* of change in virtually every aspect of our lives has been recognized for at least the last forty years, but the pace of financial and political change is becoming more than any of us can really understand. Both candidates for president are declaring that they are the best leaders we can have in such a time. Soon we will be called on to make a choice for that leadership, but more than that, the banner financial headlines should be challenging us to think more responsibly about all of our life decisions. In the long run, do we really want the consumption society we have created? What can we do about it personally?

I think this recent shakeup about international finances may be the time to think more seriously about how we make all our personal decisions about managing our money. I'm still thinking about Cindy's challenge from the dog trainer she wrote about in the Pilgrim. I preached about it two Sundays ago: "don't let the dog own you." Take control. You may not be able to change the world, but sorting out your priorities about money is one area of decision-making where you can make some choices that can change your life, if you will.

When candidates and news headlines are clamoring about change, you may think it's comforting to come to a church service where you can find the solace of familiar rituals and familiar hymns. Here then is where I must gently remind you that *change* is what you'll be hearing about this morning, for a change of heart and mind is one of the most persistent themes of the bible.

In Luke's gospel the prodigal son goes out to make a life on his own but messes up. As the saying goes, he hits bottom. But he does come to his senses and decides he must go back home again. In a parallel story from the Gospel from Matthew this morning, one servant quickly replies to his father that, sure, he'll go out in the vineyard to help out—but doesn't go. The second son swears he won't go out in the vineyard to work but changes his mind and goes. That's the kind of response that Jesus says God is calling us to. You may call it vacillation, but God calls it conversion.

The sons in both stories changed their minds, but first must come a change of heart. That's what the prophet Ezekiel is trying to say to the people of Israel, in the Old Testament passage this morning that he begins by speaking of "sour grapes." He is saying that you don't have to be locked into your past, locked into the attitudes and behaviors that have resulted in your having drifted away from God.

The best thing that can happen for you when you come here on Sunday morning is a discovery that your life doesn't have to be just what was handed to you by your parents' genes or by what you've done or had done to you by others in the past. You don't have to be just a victim of the "times we're living in." If that was our fate ordained by God, then neither St. Peter who denied knowing Jesus on the Cross nor St. Paul who persecuted Christians would be remembered at all. What made it possible for them to lead us to our lives as Christians was to discover what Ezekiel called for: "a new heart and a new spirit." No longer do we need to be locked into the "sour grapes" of the past.

In my sermon two weeks ago I talked about the "sour grapes" of refusing to forgive by holding on to the anger, resentment, and a sense of betrayal that can make your life very miserable. I said that a "vindictive mindset creates bitterness, and lets the betrayer claim one more victim." Later I got some feedback from someone who heard this sermon who gave me a copy of a Chinese proverb "He who seeks vengeance must dig two graves: one for his enemy and one for himself." (I really appreciated that proverb, and appreciated getting feedback!)

I don't think that any of us here would want to say we're so locked into old habits of thinking and old memories that we're digging our own graves, but you might agree that we're half-dead if we just keep on keeping on in old habits of the heart—habits that keep us from even wanting the change we need. I am reminded once again that we can stay in ruts so long that they can become six feet deep, as deep as graves. And I'm reminded again that the only way we can keep just coasting along—is down hill. Coasting is not much of a viable option right now.

In God's eyes, Jesus says, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are better off than that in God's eyes. He told parable stories on how such people had their lives changed by

the awakening to new possibilities that had come for them in response to the power of attraction they found in Jesus.

I believe that into every life come chances for insight, and moments of honesty. They might come because in spite of your long-held beliefs about money, or religion, or getting ahead of others, you've hit bottom, and you're finally ready for change. It might come less dramatically when a friend or someone you love, or something you've heard here on Sunday morning, may say something difficult to hear because it's life-changing, but true in a way you're now ready to hear.

You don't have to be a tax collector or a prostitute for those moments of awareness for change to come to you. The headlines may have caused you to think globally, which is a good thing, but also to think what you are doing locally, which means about your life planning. Globally and locally: globally because there's a mission revolution going on, as we're called to discover how our faith can be transferred by our gifts into changing the lives of people whose needs we know about but can't touch unless it is by our gifts, and personally, as we begin to plan ways to budget our money so that consumption spending doesn't own us.

This is a good time to realign your priorities. As a servant of God you can make choices to say "yes" to opportunities to invest your life, and then to follow up on them. This may be in new ways by measuring your financial pledge by how much you can give back, more than just how much you get from your giving. This can be in the little actions of faith, actions of hope, and actions of love, which take you in a new direction.

As I've been thinking about my own life, and trying—when I'm writing a sermon to get a picture in my mind of the issues going through your thinking as you read headlines about financial crises and presidential choices—I realize that I can't figure out all these things just intellectually. Some of what's happening is too complicated for me to understand, but more than that, I know my choices come down to what kind of life I want to offer and the legacy I want to leave.

At the end all of this means that life is an affair of the heart. And our hearts are shaped by the company we keep, the decisions we make, and costs we're willing to pay. If you want to find out what that looks like, if you want to live that, I say that you've come to the right place. So as you get ready to come to the altar this morning you are getting ready to say "Yes" to the God who can change your life! For once again we will hear the invitation this morning, "Lift up your hearts." AMEN