

“Taboos & Transformations”

Acts 11.1–18 & Revelation 21.1–6

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 6 May 2007

The life of the church is the story of internal struggle. It is the story of people who are rooted in history, but who are called to change. It is said that the seven last words spoken in any congregation are, “We have always done it this way.”

In the Acts of the Apostles, we have a wonderful story about opening the boundaries of the church to accept non-Jewish Christians. Earlier, anyone wishing to be a follower of the Christ first had to convert to Judaism, since Christianity was a sect of Judaism. And it took a good Pharisaic Jew like Paul to help open the gates. In today’s story we have Peter standing on a rooftop in Jerusalem looking into the air and a great cloth descends from on high. I imagine that it’s a red-and-white checked tablecloth, drawn up in the four corners, and inside are all kinds of non-kosher animals that Peter and his pals are going to have for dinner. This is the story that I like to refer to as “The Great Apostolic Barbeque.” I can imagine Peter smelling North Carolina mustard barbeque on pork tenderloin, and Texas barbeque on some baby back ribs. The man had no idea what he’d been missing! (And you have to believe that someone at the Great Apostolic Barbecue had to say, “You know, this tastes just like chicken!”)

While eating pork is a major bonus for some Christians, that’s not the central message of the story. It’s one of those stories in which God replaces the central value of purity with the core value of compassion and inclusion. Peter and his dinner guests finally get the picture that they are going to have to do things a new way, and they conclude, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the *metanoia* – the change of heart – that leads to life.”

This table that you see before you is set not exclusively for the pure in heart, but for all people. When you come to this table it is not an endorsement of your holiness, but a sign of your quest, your pilgrimage to seek Christ as the way, the truth, and the life.

So, what are the taboos of today’s church? In some traditions, it isn’t eating with Gentiles... it’s welcoming gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to Christ’s table, welcoming them into the full life of the church. People with disabilities have also felt unwelcome. The number-one priority of the Deacon’s Subcommittee on Sanctuary Redesign is removing the barriers that deny worshippers access in this space. So, you’ll see a ramp into the chancel, cut-outs in the pews for wheelchair users, about twice as much light, and carpet in the center aisle that’s not so easy to trip over.

So, what are our taboos here at Plymouth? I want to reflect back to you my experience over the past five years. When I came to Plymouth, *talking about money from the pulpit* was something new, different, and uncomfortable for this congregation. It is not easy for me to stand up here and talk to you about money, but nobody says that change is easy. I’m not sure that it was easy for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to sit down with Gentiles for a BLT at lunch, but they did it anyway, because it is necessary. In 2002, this church raised \$269,000 for Plymouth’s mission and ministry; this year, we’ve raised that number to \$480,000. Now, those are just numbers, but to increase your giving by that kind of margin is astounding; it says that there are vital things happening in the faith lives of people who comprise this church.

I’d like to invite you to take the insert out of your bulletin and find Plymouth’s Mission Statement and it’s pictorial version.

PLYMOUTH'S MISSION: It is our mission to worship God and help make God's realm visible in the lives of people, individually and collectively, especially as it is set forth in the life, teachings, death and living presence of Jesus Christ. We do this by:



“It is our mission to worship God and help make God’s realm visible in the lives of people, individually and collectively, especially as it is set forth in the life, teachings, death, and living presence of Jesus Christ.” That’s the basic mission statement...to worship God and help make the kingdom of God visible. And the motion you see in the drawing below identifies that we don’t do this by keeping things just the way they are...we do it through change.

When John’s revelation of Christ on the throne speaks the words, “See, I am making all things new,” it is a dramatic clue that Christians are not called to be guardians of the status quo, but to be on the vanguard of what God (through Isaiah) calls “doing a new thing.”¹

Inviting – transforming – sending. These are not original ideas, but come from a wonderful book by Kirk Hadaway,² who used to be director of research for the UCC and now works for the Episcopal Church USA (out of the frying pan and into the fire). At any rate, Kirk writes, “A church is (or should be) a worshipping community where people are transformed into citizens of God’s Realm, into people who see differently and, thus, live differently in the world.”³ Do you hear *change* in that statement?

Change is not always fun. Change is not always easy. Change is not always pleasant. And those are the things we sometimes wish our lives would be: fun, easy, and pleasant. And those are the things the mainstream media use to sell us products on a daily basis. But part of being a “citizen of the kingdom of God” means departing from the culture when it comes into conflict with faith.

My dad was a management consultant, and one of his guiding lights was Peter Drucker, who was the great management guru in the generation before Tom Peters started searching for excellence. Kirk Hadaway quotes Peter Drucker in one of the best statements I’ve heard about the nature of who we are as the church, and I’d ask you to

¹ Isaiah 43.19

² Kirk Hadaway, *Behold, I Do a New Thing*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

³ *ibid.*, p. 19.

pay close attention to this: “The business of a church is to *change* people; the business of a corporation is to *satisfy* them.”⁴

So, a customer-satisfaction survey wouldn’t be an appropriate instrument for measuring the health of a congregation. May we need to develop a Change Survey that measures how much you have been provoked to think, believe, and act differently. If you haven’t felt some degree of discomfort with something that Sharon or I have said from the pulpit, with some letter you’ve received from the Stewardship Committee or the Building Committee, or read in the *Placard*, then we aren’t doing our job. (And it’s okay for you to challenge us, by the way!)



So, how did we get to this point? How did we get here today, where we are going to break ground on new additions to our facilities here at Plymouth? It hasn’t been by scrupulously maintaining the status quo and avoiding risk at every turn.

We started in 2003 with a strategic planning process that involved having “Holy Conversations,” as our consultant Alice Mann calls them. We’ve grown numerically from 398 members to 575 members, and we have another new members’ class this month! We’ve started functioning like a program-sized church. We took the programmatic needs we identified and created a long-range Master Plan that matched them with physical plant needs. We had our first capital campaign in a generation, which exceeded our consultant, Bea Stoner’s, estimate of what we could raise. We’ve worked with our architects at RB+B to put flesh on our dreams and our call. And today we begin a new chapter in Plymouth’s long history, with a few shovelsful of earth, to move toward the future that God calls us to.

This pilgrimage we have been on together these five years has taken vision, discernment, generosity, risk-taking, commitment, and a large measure of faith. And I want to congratulate you, because you have been on a journey of transformation.

Even as we break ground, I know that there will be more growth and more transitions on the way we travel together. May we have the courage to move through the transformation God is calling us toward. Together, we will walk the pilgrim way.

Amen.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 11