

Signs of Change  
1/25/09  
Romans 8:18-20

It's been just over a month since I last preached and since then a lot has happened. We celebrated Christmas, Kwanzaa, New Years, 3 Kings Day, Martin Luther King Day. We bought the building across the street. We inaugurated our first African-American president. Some started back to school after a break. We said goodbye to Pastor Peter and Christy and hello again to Pastor Leonard and his family. We baptized 2 new members of our church. We've been busy! These events in many ways symbolize what we've been preaching about this month – hope and change.

The last few weeks Pastor Leonard has been preaching about hope and change. He talked about how so often our hope is for some vague future time. Some day things will be better, some day we'll have this or that. Some day our troubles will be over. But God doesn't want us to be living for some day. He wants us to have eternal life right now. Last week he talked about it's time for change. If God wants us to enjoy eternal life right now and live as His people, then it's time for change. We can't live as people without hope and without God anymore, because we do have hope and we do have God in our lives.

Over Christmas Vandy and I started talking about we needed to make a change in our lives. And we decided the best way to make this change was to do so as a family so we could hold each other accountable for actually doing the change. Last week Pastor Leonard mentioned in his sermon that change happens most effectively within community where we can be held accountable. So we joined a gym. We picked one close to our house so that it's convenient, and because it was the New Year, they had a special on their registration fee. And we made sure this place had equipment that we all actually wanted to use. We found out that our insurance would rebate us some of the fee after a certain number of workouts so we had a financial incentive for joining as well as the idea of doing something together as a family and doing something good for our health. Sounds great doesn't it?

The first time we went, we all 3 went and met this nice man named John who told us all about the place and what they could do and we said, sign us up. Now because we have committed to losing weight as well as getting in shape, I also went out that day and bought a new digital scale. I got one that shows your weight in increments of 1/5 pound. That way you don't have to wait until you lose a 1/2 pound before you see a change in the number. It's more motivational. But stepping on the scale for the first time after the holidays is a painful experience. Getting through the first workout with the weights is also a painful experience. We've been doing some sweating! But we're seeing some results. I can now do 2 sets of all the weight exercises instead of the pitiful 1/2 set I did the first day and we're up to 40 minutes on the treadmill.

Why am I telling you all this? What does it have to do with the Romans 8 passage that Johnny read for us earlier? Let's look at verse 18. "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." The title of the sermon today is signs of change and when I read this passage the phrase "our present sufferings" stood out to me. One sign of change, of hope, is suffering. How bizarre is that? We think of suffering as a bad thing and we try to avoid it as much as possible. But in this passage we see it is a sign of hope and change.

In the gym, the suffering of sore muscles is a sign of change happening and it gives hope. We're building strength and endurance. In watching the inauguration on Tuesday and listening to the news this past week with people reflecting on the fact that we now have our first African-American president, we all were reminded of the struggle it took to get to this point as a nation. One report I watched was talking about how the Capital steps, where President Obama took the oath of office, was built by slaves. They actually played a recording which was made in the 1930's of a former slave singing a spiritual as part of that news report. It brought home just how close we are to those slave days and how much change has happened. It also brought home to me how tragic it has been that change didn't happen much sooner. It has been a struggle to get to this point in our history but as long as we struggled, there was

hope for change. When we stop struggling, when we stop trying, change is no longer possible.

Paul goes on in the next few verses and he writes that not only do we suffer, but all creation suffers. All creation is in bondage to decay. This phrase highlights the fact that everything dies. It is a scientific law that things move from a state of order to a state of chaos. Anyone who cleans house knows that. You can have a room in your house that you never use but it will still need to be dusted from time to time. And if a house stays empty, it will start to fall apart. Why? Because no one is taking care of it. Things move from a state of order to chaos. Things decay. All creation is in bondage to decay. But Paul writes that creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed because then creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. The present condition of the world of moving from order to chaos, of aging, decaying, dying, is a sign of hope that one day we will be liberated from this. All creation will be set free from this cycle of death and decay. Suffering is a sign of hope as we wait for change to be completed.

We've already started moving in the direction of this change. We've already started moving from decay to glory. How do we know this? Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:20-22 "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." We don't have this yet. People still die. But we know as people of God, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, that the resurrection is real and our hope, the hope in which we were saved, is that we too will be resurrected. But, as Pastor Leonard said a few weeks ago, we don't have to wait til the resurrection to fully live. We live in Christ now and God is now at work in our lives.

Another sign of change is the work of the Holy Spirit in the world and in our lives today. Paul writes in verse 23 "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of

our bodies” and in verses 26 and 27 “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.” The Holy Spirit is active in our lives and He is working change in our lives. We don’t even know all that needs to happen in our lives and in the world. In the Greek, verses 26 and 27 say “we do not know what is necessary for us to pray but the Spirit Himself urgently appeals in unspeakable groans. The one searching our hearts knows what the thought of the Spirit is and appeals on behalf of the holy ones.”

The Spirit is within us and knows His own mind. The Spirit knows what it is that we need. He knows what change needs to take place within us and in the circumstances surrounding our lives. And he urgently appeals to the Father on our behalf. Not only does the Spirit intercede for us but Jesus himself is at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us as well (verse 34). The work of the Spirit in our lives and in the world is a sign of hope and change.

What other work is the Spirit doing besides making urgent appeals on our behalf? He is also working for our good to conform us to the image of Christ. The Greek word for conform is *summorphos* and it means to have a similar form, nature or style. We would express this thought as something morphs into something else. We are in a process of morphing into the image of Christ. This is the work the Holy Spirit does in our lives. He shapes our character, our spirits, our minds, our nature to be like Christ. And this can involve suffering at times. It can be painful. We have to recognize the truth about ourselves. Just as it’s painful to see one’s true weight after the holidays, it’s painful to realize how much destruction sin has brought into our lives. But it’s necessary to recognize it so we can change. In President Obama’s inauguration speech he talked about the winter of our hardship, and that we have to recognize where we truly are as a country so we can make the necessary changes. As individuals we have to recognize where we truly are with God so that the Holy Spirit can change us. And we have to cooperate with that change. The Holy Spirit’s work in us is a

process, just as our working out in the gym is a process. It may take a while before change is seen, but we continue working in hope of what will be, certain that God will complete the work He has begun in us.

Another sign of change and hope is us, the Church, the people of God. The fact that God's people come together to worship and learn and pray and reach out is a sign of hope for change. In verse 29 Paul writes "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters." It is God's intent, and always has been, that many people come to know Him and be conformed to the image of His Son. We've seen how people have continued to come to this church and how over the years we have grown, not only in numbers, but in seeing people conformed into the image of Christ. We are now in a time of transition and change, moving from this building to the bigger building across the street because of the growth that has taken place here. Not only do we need more physical space, but as people are growing spiritually, there is more desire for ministry to take place. We are a very busy congregation and yet we see that there is so much more than can be done. We have a lot of hope for what God can do in this community and so change has to happen.

Jesus brought tremendous change during his ministry. One sign of change he made was in the Passover celebration. Instead of having his disciples continue to celebrate Passover as a remembrance of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt, he changed it to be a remembrance of his sacrificial death, of the new covenant between God and humanity sealed with his blood, and the coming of the kingdom of God. We have now been delivered from slavery to death and brought into new life. Our celebration of communion is a sign of change and hope. There has been a change in our relationship with God. We are no longer separated from Him, but those of us who believe and confess that Jesus Christ has died for our sins, has been resurrected, and is Lord of our lives, are now adopted into God's family as His children. We are in the process of being conformed to be like Jesus. And we also have the hope of resurrection. We haven't yet received everything that God has promised us. There are greater

things ahead of us. But we wait for it eagerly as Paul writes in Romans 8. Our celebration of communion is as much a celebration of hope for the future as it is a celebration of what has been done in the past.

As we prepare to take communion this morning let's do so in hope.