

August 1, 2021
How Change Happens

Prelude

Welcome/Invocation ~ Lammas; Late August, Mary Chivers

Hymn ~ Be Thou Our Vision, G154

*Readings ~ On Change: Rainer Maria Rilke; Greta Thunberg;
Corinthians; Gandhi*

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer ~ Be Thou Our Vision

Message ~ The Faith and Practice of Change

Hymn ~ The Great Storm is Over, G215

Benediction ~ Want the Change

Postlude

Welcome and Invocation

Good morning Friends. Welcome to everyone here at our Meetinghouse and welcome to everyone wherever you are on Zoom. I am Rebecca Schillenback and I will be guiding us in worship together today along with Jeffrey Layton, who is offering us his music ministry on the piano.

We gather today at the midway point between the summer solstice and the fall equinox. In the early Northern European church, this was the holy feast day of Lammas. Overlaid upon the feast days of the more ancient earth-centered agricultural religions indigenous to Europe which preceded Christianity, on this holiday the first loaves of bread from the first harvest of wheat were brought to churches to be blessed, a ritual of gratitude for what the land had given, and of hope for continuing abundance as summer turned on its fulcrum and headed toward fall. So I offer this poem about the changes that can be observed as midsummer gives way to late summer, to begin our worship on this ancient holy day:

Mary Chivers: "Late August"

It's as if we're always preparing for something, the endless roll of the earth ripening us. Even on the most tranquil late August afternoon when heavy heads of phlox bow in the garden and the hummingbird sits still for a moment on a branch of an apple tree — even on such a day, evening approaches sooner than yesterday, and we cannot help noticing whole families of birds arrive together in the enclosure, young bluebirds molted a misty grey, colored through no will of their own for a journey. On such an evening I ache for what I cannot keep—the birds, the phlox, the late-flying bees— though I would not forbid the frost, even if I could. There will be more to love and to lose in what's to come and there will be this too: the desire to see it clearly before it's gone.

Let us sing a hymn together for clear sightedness amid the changes at the fulcrum of summer: Be Thou Our Vision, Green Hymnal, 154

Readings:

from The Sonnets to Orpheus by Rainer Maria Rilke

Want the change. Be inspired by the flame where everything shines as it disappears. ... Pour yourself out like a fountain. Flow into the knowledge that what you are seeking finishes often at the start, and, with ending, begins. Every happiness is the child of a separation it did not think it could survive...

--From a speech given at the United Nations Climate Summit in 2019 by then 16 year old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. The World is waking up. Change is coming, whether you like it or not.

Mahatma Gandhi, from an essay published in Indian Opinion, August 9, 1913.

We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme.

1 Corinthians 15:51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed...**2 Corinthians 5:17** The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

~sharing of joys and concerns~

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, Be Thou Our Vision, we pray today. Help us to see as you would see. Help us to see this world, this moment that is passing away -- clearly and with love before it is gone. Help us to stand in the midst of great change and dread it not, deny it not. Help us to understand what is ours to be and see and do -- what is ours to notice, as change comes. Be Thou our Wisdom, and the words upon our lips. Be Thou the love with which we touch this changing world, with which we see all that is passing away and all that is new. Be thou our vision, oh love of our own changing hearts, we pray together today. Amen.

Message

Twice this summer, our steep one-lane gravel road up the side of our hill has dramatically washed out during severe thunderstorms. The road clings to the side of the hill. There is a near vertical cliff heading up on one side, and a near vertical drop heading down on the other. There's incredible potential for very fast-moving stormwater runoff above and below the road and down the road itself. The deluge of rain in these storms was an enormous amount of water from the sky all at once. They were what our family has dubbed 'climate change rain.'

The second time it happened, I was driving home mid-storm and I headed up the hill before I realized that that was a very carelessly made decision, because I found myself mid-way up the steepest part of the road mid-washout. It was terrifying, dangerous and totally unwise. People have found themselves in life threatening flash floods in similar situations, and I'm lucky that it hadn't rained two inches in the hour instead of just one. The water was boiling, roaring down the steep hillside like a waterfall, carrying the shale rocks of the cliff with it. The ditch was a newly excavated canyon overflowing its banks, running over the road and down the cliff on the other side, cutting deep chasms in the road and causing the roadbed to sag as the cliff below it eroded. I accelerated our old four-wheel drive sport-utility vehicle through the rushing water, my heart pounding. I arrived safely home shocked and shaken.

I've been thinking ever since about Change. About how change happens. How people change. When we must. And how we don't change. When we must. I've been thinking about how we weather change, when the weather is changing. The infrastructure of our lives in the places we inhabit on planet Earth -- the bridges, the culverts, the roads -- that infrastructure was designed for a world where water could be expected to behave within certain parameters, where rain generally fell in certain ways. But we are living in a world whose ways and parameters are changing, are being changed. We are living in a world that is passing away. Behold: the new has come.

Twice this summer the rain was so heavy that our road was washed out. Twice it has been rebuilt by virtue of collective tax revenue and massive diesel-powered machinery. I think it's likely that it will be washed out again and rebuilt again. I wonder how many times we will do this. So far, in my neighborhood, we're adapting to the changes in the way our world is behaving by using our power, our agency, the fossil fuels we've extracted, to force the

world back into the shape we're familiar with. I wonder what it's like in other neighborhoods. I wonder too about how we make change happen and how change happens to us. I know we resist change. We deny change and fear it, but sometimes we welcome it, and sometimes we even work with it, we come alongside it, encourage it, and lend our power to it. Sometimes we even worship it, revere it. I wonder how we decide which orientation to have with change. How we decide to like it or not. Is there a difference in our faith and practice between how we orient ourselves and relate to change that we consider positive evolution -- what we might call progress -- and the faith and practice with which we face change that feels catastrophic and violent? Where is God in each of those kinds of changes? Is there a difference in our faith and practice between how we relate to the massive systemic transformation that is the new geological era-inaugurating disruption of human caused climate change -- and how we relate in faith and practice to the seismic, epochal shifts that are also happening in the cultural imagination right now, in our stories, myths, and historical narratives in every realm of how we conceive our identity, from race and gender to the political, spiritual and economic? Those changes have felt chaotic, unsettling, and unpredictable to some and way past necessary to others. My approach to change that was threatening to me on my disintegrating hill was to step on the gas, muster all the power of fossil fuel that I could, and blast through it, racing safely home in the storm. A kind of Pre-rational Will to Survive kicked in. Watching the reactions of some of my fellow citizens to changes -- or even just proposed changes -- changes in the stories we tell and share and who's allowed to share -- about who we are as people and as a nation, and who we are striving to become -- witnessing the fevered debates over so-called critical race theory for example, I recognize what looks like a similar pre-rational will to survive being activated in the face of change. Change is often hard and often scary. It can feel violent when it's resisted. And it can reflect back to us a view of our own changing condition that we don't like.

2 years ago, at the UN Climate Summit then 16 year old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg famously and thunderously prophesied to the adults in the room that "Change is coming, whether you like it or not." This summer adults and children all over the world are confronting that truth. Change is upon us. Not here right now, but elsewhere on this planet in this moment, Floods and fires, heat waves and heat domes, massive die-offs of marine wildlife, a changing jet stream, a deforested Amazon Rainforest that now emits more carbon dioxide than it absorbs. Change is here, now, whether we like it or not, and more is

coming. I know when she spoke those words, Greta Thunberg was probably invoking the rising power of a younger generation as a *force* for **change** *because* they will be *forced* to contend with the consequences of the **changed world** that the previous generations have left for them, *whether* they like it or not. They have no choice or agency about that. But there is something in her words that invites wondering where the choice and the agency is, in regard to the change that is coming. Her words can sound like a threat and doubtless that is the way that some people hear them. But she is correct in a simple, objective, meta-theological way. Change is always coming, whether we like it or not. From birth to death, change comes. It comes for individuals, for individual human bodies, and it comes for societies, for species, for planet communities. Change happens. Life changes constantly. It changes forms and chemical compositions. Cells divide, viruses mutate and reproduce. Children grow up. Even in death, the other side of life, decay is an active process of change, a busy alchemy of breakdown and regeneration, a maker-space for new life. Change is always coming, absolutely irrespective of our opinions, feelings, and feedback. Whether we like it or not. And that might be where the agency is. could we like the change that is coming? Or perhaps try to change something about the change, to make it more to our liking? could we alter our own relationship to it somehow, change how we feel about the change? Could we change how we feel about Change itself? could we change ourselves? Could we change our interpretation of change? Perhaps we could *want* the change as Rainer Maria Rilke put it so beautifully. Perhaps as Gandhi mused, we could see in change, a deep supreme divine mystery, a reflection of ourselves and our own condition.

Certainly nature keeps reflecting back to us our human transformations of it, in almost wise and poetic ways. One example I heard this past week on the radio was the way in which the chemicals in the plastic containers we make from petroleum byproducts disrupt our bodies' hormonal homeostasis and have directly and precisely led to precipitously falling birthrates and decline in human fertility over the last 20 years. We are changing the world and it is changing us. This circularity and mutuality of our mutability on Earth brings us always to the fact of our inescapable belonging to the world we're in -- belonging to this world of flesh and blood, of water, rock, and mud -- belonging to this equally dear and dangerous place of embodiment, time, and change. Belonging, I think, is a good faith and a good practice in the face of any kind of change. Behold: I tell you a mystery. We shall all be changed.

I have changed my job. And my new job has to do with the mystery of change. I'm the chaplain for Cortland County for Hospicare, the hospice organization that serves both Tompkins and Cortland counties. It's my job to accompany people through the last changes of their lives, and to offer my presence to loved ones who are accompanying those they love on that journey of change. Mostly my job is to listen. I have listened to the people who are changing. I have listened to the people who love them. I have listened as people tell me what has been important to them, what's mattered to them while they have been a beloved body amongst other beloved bodies, upon the body of Earth. Mostly what I have done is hear people tell me what they love and what they have loved, what they have belonged to, what they want to see clearly, before it is gone. Which happens to be the best faith and practice in the face of change that I can come up with, here at the fulcrum of summer, in this summer of change.

Silent Waiting Worship

Benediction

May we want the change. Because Change is coming, whether we like or not. Let us not forbid the frost, even if we could. There will be more to love and to lose in what's to come, so let us see it clearly with love, belonging to it, before it is gone. Behold! I tell you a mystery...we shall all be changed.