

If change is challenging, then we are living in one of the most challenging times in our lifetimes. 2020 not only brought us a new decade, but also a new pandemic and renewed racial tensions. Sometimes change is necessary. Often change is resisted. We continue to face changes to limit the spread of the Corona Virus. Now we see growing resistance to those changes as people long for greater freedom and react to the mixed messages we are receiving.

We are certainly facing a time when changes need to be made in our nation when it comes to race relations and how people from different races are treated. As I think about the events in our nation over the past few weeks, there are some things that stand out.

First, the death of George Floyd that sparked these current events was a tragedy that should not have happened. It was the spark to bring racial tensions to a boil again. Man's inhumanity to man is always wrong. There are prejudices and inequalities that need to be addressed in our nation. There is certainly no room for prejudice in the Christian community. Minority children need better education and their families need support to remain intact. Many people don't know that more black lives are lost by abortions every year than for any other reason.

Black lives are essential. Brown lives are essential. Yellow lives are essential. Red lives are essential. White lives are essential. People don't just matter to God; we are given life by God. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to give forgiveness and life to all people. All human lives need to be protected and defended. As God tells us through the prophet Micah, we need to seek justice. Jesus tells us to be peacemakers.

Second, peaceful demonstrations for change to correct injustices are a basic right we have as Americans. Freedom of speech is an important. We cannot afford to lose it. But destruction of property and attacks on other people are wrong. Two wrongs don't make a right and cannot be accepted, ignored or condoned.

The racial tension and problems in our nation run deep. I am not sure what all needs to change or how to bring about those changes. We have been trying to correct these problems for a long time. But I do know that Christians can be a voice for change. We can speak up for those who can't speak for themselves. We cannot remain silent when we hear people spreading hatred or prejudice. We need to be well informed and not settle for what we hear on the news or through social media. There is a lot of misinformation out there. Check out organizations that claim to address the situations. Some are legitimate and really are helping people. Others are fronts promoting a political agenda.

Third, we can pray for our nation. We can pray for wisdom. We can pray for those who are hurting. We can pray that God will forgive us for the wrongs we have done and for help to do what is right. We can ask God to heal our land.

The history of the early Christian Church in Jerusalem takes us back to a time of necessary change that was also met by resistance. The Disciples were sent by Jesus to tell people about Him. The Sanhedrin, or Jewish Supreme Court, resisted that change. They threatened the Disciples, ordered them to stop speaking about Jesus and threw them into jail. But they could not stop the Apostle's from spreading the Gospel message.

God sent an angel to break the Disciples out of jail. Then next morning they were back in the temple courtyard telling people about Jesus. The Sanhedrin had the Disciples brought before them and made two new charges against them. They said, *"You have filled all Jerusalem with your teaching about him, and you want to make us responsible for his death!"* (vs. 28)

Peter's response was simple and clear. *"We must obey God rather than any human authority."* (vs. 29) Peter was announcing a new order. God is God and we are not. God decides what is right and what is not. The Disciples were going to obey God, not the Sanhedrin. This is a response repeated throughout history of God's people that plays out in three ways.

The first is to please God above all. The Disciples would place their lives on the line to serve the Lord. Joseph resisted the advance of Mrs. Potiphar by saying, *"How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"* (Genesis 39:9) The Hebrew midwives disobeyed Pharaoh's order to kill the newborn Jewish male babies. Daniel refused to pray to the king and faced the lion's den. Obeying God may place us at risk. Do we want to risk deliberately disobeying God?

The second is to serve God above all. Serving God not only takes faith, it takes some hard work, patience, strength and God's Spirit. Moses served God by spending the final years of his life wandering in the wilderness with an unruly mob. Trying to lead the Israelites was like trying to herd cats. The prophet Jeremiah served God and faced ridicule, hatred and even death at the hands of his fellow countrymen. Mary put her life on the line when she was told that she would be the mother of the promised Savior and said that she was the servant of the Lord. Obeying God may place our future at risk.

The third is to obey God above all. Abraham left his home and traveled to an unknown place in response to God's call when he was already an old man. The Wise Men left their homeland behind to worship the newborn king of the Jews. The Disciples stood before the Sanhedrin and defied their authority. To obey God means to surrender the moment and put our past at risk.

But when we are pleasing God, serving God and obeying God we find a tremendous freedom. When we surrender our lives to God, we admit that God is God and we are not. We open our lives to a tidal wave of God's compassion and love. We can become agents for change for the good in our homes, our communities and our society. We can be agents for change in the church by renewing our commitment to the Lord and reaching out beyond the walls of the church with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me finish by asking you three questions from our District staff about what we have learned over the past few months.

1. What have we learned about ourselves and the Lord's ministry?
2. What truths have surfaced and what new skills for ministry have we developed?
3. How might the Holy Spirit want to expand His Kingdom's reign through us?

I passed these three questions onto the elected leaders of Peace this past week. They are questions we all need to consider. Change can be challenging, but sometimes it is necessary. May God lead and guide us by His Spirit that our lives are transformed by Christ so that individually and collectively we may be the people and the Christian community God wants us to be. Amen.