
CHANGING YOUR MIND
JEREMIAH 18:1-11
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2022,
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We should be used to change by now. Here we are in another academic year at Duke, but this academic year will not be like last academic year. Classes have changed perhaps, and new ones are being offered. Staff and administration faces—all over campus—have changed. Certain offices or center locations have changed. And those who've been around Duke for a while know that Duke as a whole institution has changed over the years, moving from a regional institution to a global research I institution of higher learning. We should be used to change by now.

Mask-wearing, social-distancing, hand-sanitizing, quarantining, food-eating together, no food-eating together, gathering, no-gathering, preschool opening, preschool closing, handshaking, no handshaking, hugging, no hugging, fist-bumping, elbow-greeting, remote-working, zoom-private-chatting-in-a-meeting, work force declining, restaurants closing, airlines cancelling. We should be used to change by now. We have had to adjust and adapt and be flexible due to a pandemic.

The truth be told, no one day is alike, so everyday there is a change. Today is not like yesterday and will not be like tomorrow. No Sunday is alike. Days change, the weather changes, relationships change. The one constant in life is change. We should be used to this by now.

Did you know that God even changes? The words of Jeremiah reveal this.

The iTunes history of sermons and Bible studies and the Spotify musical lists of Christian music may emphasize the image of the potter and clay like the gospel song, “the Potter wants to put you back together again.” But what's less emphasized is how God changed. God changed directions. God changed God's mind and adapted to what God was experiencing. We hear that “The vessel [the potter] was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.” God makes it clear to Jeremiah that the potter is God. “Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”

But what's striking is that the potter, God, reworks the clay into another vessel. It wasn't the original plan or design, so God pivoted and kept working on the clay to refashion it. God's plans were not fixed. God changed, and not just the clay. God didn't get stuck in a past concept or idea, but God reworked the clay into something else that was good. God changed God's mind.

This is made clearer when God speaks to Jeremiah: “At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.”

God changed his mind. God may initially want to pluck up or plant, but God is willing to change his mind on either of those, depending on the circumstances. This isn't unusual for God actually. In Exodus, as an example, when the children of Israel created a golden calf to worship, God was going to destroy them, but then we learn—and I quote—that “Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (Exod 32:14). God changed his mind, which also means relented or repented. All three of these words mean the same thing in Hebrew.

And what about us? What about you? Playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, “Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

Being created in the image of God suggests that we, too, should be open to change and the changing of our minds. Maybe we need to first change our mind and repent of our thinking about God, imagining God is a stuck in the

mud, never flexible but always a static, stonelike, rigid, never changing deity. But God like a potter takes human clay and reworks it, if necessary. God changes what might have been planned.

Being shaped by this God means that change is always possible. What Sam Cooke sang many years ago we can say about the Christian life: “a change is gonna come.” Clay is clay but the shape and design of the clay can change in the potter’s hands. This means that God can rework you, rework the plans you had, the major you thought you were going to pursue, the job you always wanted, the social clubs on your initial wish list. God can rework all of that for the good. You thought apples, but it turned into oranges for the good. It’s like when choir conductor has to change their pedagogical approach to reach their musical goals if the sounds they’re hearing from the choir are not the ones they want.

When you’re formed by the potter, God, expect change. You are shaped in such a way to be nimble and not trapped in gothic stone. Flexible. adaptable, realizing that change is possible and inevitable, so that you don’t have to be locked into an imagined future forever, because in God change can and will come. Your life can change. Your desires can change. Your habits can change. Your interests can change.

God shows us that like clay, we will most likely have to rework our plans and ideas. As a Christian, expect change. We will have to change our minds at some point on life’s journey. In the potter’s hands, we don’t stay the same nor do circumstances stay the same. In God, we learn that there should be a willingness to change course or direction, to rework an old idea, to recognize that not every plan or great idea or expectation will manifest, to know that a plan or project may need to be adapted or altered.

There’s a sense that you have to change your mind about never changing your mind. If not, we may end up like the elephants a man saw in passing. He suddenly stopped, confused by the fact that these huge creatures were being held by only a small rope tied to their front leg. No chains, no cages. It was obvious that the elephants could break away from their bonds but for some reason, they did not. He saw a trainer nearby and asked why these animals just stood there and made no attempt to get away. The trainer said, “when they are very young and much smaller, we use the same size rope to tie them and, at that age, it’s enough to hold them. As they grow up, they are conditioned to believe they cannot break away. They believe the rope can still hold them, so they never try to break free.”

These animals could at any time break free from their bonds but because they believed they couldn’t, they were stuck right where they were. Like the elephants, many of us may go through life hanging on to a belief that we cannot do something, simply because we failed at it before, or we’ve never tried. By not changing our minds, we can be stuck forever.

But life with God is like research—it is awe and discovery and full of unknowns and mystery, which means that what you think you might find may not be what you actually find. What you expect may not be what you get, requiring something or someone—you—to change course or careers or relationships or your opinion.

We see this in the history of the people of God. Even in the letter to Philemon, the scripture for today, apostle Paul has a change of heart regarding Onesimus and wants Philemon to take Onesimus back, not as a slave, but a brother, because of love. Then in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says that if you don’t give up your possessions, take up a cross and follow him, you can’t be a disciple. In other words, if you don’t change your mind, if you don’t relent or repent, you’re not the disciple of Jesus you may think you are. Something has to change in you in order to follow Jesus. It’s the way of God all throughout the scriptures.

Change—from divine to human. Change—when blind eyes see. Change—when the lame walk. Change—when lepers are cleansed. Change—from water into wine. Change—from crucifixion to resurrection. Change—from death to life. Change—a new heaven and a new earth. Change is everywhere in the kingdom of God. It’s the pathway of discipleship and even of learning—change.

Learning is about changing your mind. When you sit in a classroom for a lecture or small group discussion. When you read a book or an article. When you do an experiment in a lab. When you engage in research in the Perkin library archives. When you learn, it involves change. Learning can be an expansion or deconstruction or construction or a

deepening or an enlightening— and all of this is change. Your mind shifts or like clay in the potter's hands, it is reworked. And that is okay because as a caterpillar knows, it's not until you change that you will find your wings.

So this academic year, are you willing to change your mind about a subject, an issue, a person, a group, your future, your work, God? This is the year for intellectual and spiritual repentance, a change of mind and heart.

God desires change and in the potter's hand, when you follow Jesus, you will be changed forever, reworked for redemption. I know I've been changed, and I'll never be the same. I wouldn't be here otherwise. I can say like Tramaine Hawkins, "A wonderful change has come over me...a wonderful change has come over me." Thanks be to God!