

A Time for Every Purpose
UUF

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For every thing there is a season, and a time to every matter under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

A time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes, Ch. 3, v1-8.

The term Ecclesiastes, is the ancient Greek translation of a Hebrew term that means “Teacher”. The Book of Ecclesiastes focuses on the limits of life, in order to teach wisdom. It tells us that no matter your knowledge, virtue or power, life will encounter evil, injustice and certainly death.

These verses I believe are telling us that there is an up and a down in life. Starts and stops, good and so-called bad. In other words, things never remain the same. Before the Bible and before Socrates, a Greek philosopher, Heraclitus became famous for the saying: “No man ever steps into the same river twice.” Even the river is forever changing.

So how do we deal with the unavoidable? How do we deal with the given of change? I’d like you to answer that question for yourselves. I invite you into a few moments of data gathering. Play along, I’m hopeful you’ll discover some personal wisdom.

Clasp your hands together, with your fingers interwoven, like this. Now that’s not hard, we’ve all done it a thousand times. Now I want you to do it again, this time, place the other thumb and other fingers on top. Do it the opposite way.

So what was that like? What did you learn or discover about your self? In a word, Yuck! That was disconcerting, anything but restful. Ditto, the preferred way we cross our arms or legs. Even the simplest of change can challenge our sense of comfort, our sense of normalcy.

I want to take a 10,000 foot view and remind you: this congregation has been in the throws of change for 8-10 years now. I know all things change, so in a way, that's not news. But I want to name a particular type of change that you've been in. It's called "transition". You've been in a sea of change for a bunch of years.

Some years ago, this congregation experienced the ending of a long tenured ministry. It was the longest tenured ministry this congregation has known in its 60+ years. That transition occurred over a number of years.

That transition led to another transition. You had a two year interim minister. That ministry, by design, was intended to focus on change. By looking back at who you have been and looking forward to who you wanted to become. That is the task of interim ministry. Two years with an intentional focus on change, on transition.

You then called me as your minister. The third called minister in 59 years, the third minister in 3-4 years. And I want to suggest we are still in transition, still in the process of getting comfortable folding our hands differently.

We all know about change. We all know there are stages of change. We even have names for some of them. Infant, toddler, young adult, senior. Start-up for a new business, puppy-love for youthful romance. Each of these represents a stage of existence. I'll come back to stages and types of change later.

There is also something called the change process. The basic idea is that there are stages of change that represent an identifiable process. Steps of change if you will. Perhaps the best known is the AA 12 step process for alcoholics. There is an AA program for children and family members of alcoholics. That same fundamental model for change has been used for those addicted to gambling, sex and drugs. Why re-invent the wheel? The model works.

There is another model of change that has become popular, first introduced in 1969 by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book “On Death and Dying”. She proposed a five step process of loss and grief. While many have taken it as a lock-step process, it’s really more a guide than a template. Not everyone goes through the exact same process or with the same degree of intensity.

The first stage is **Denial**. When we get that fateful call, our first response is often, “NO. It can’t be!” We put up an emotional barrier to protect us from the shock, the pain. The next step is **Anger**. We often get angry that we are forced to deal with pain and anguish; with such a loss. We might blame the doctor or hospital, or “how could they have let her get behind the wheel?” We can even blame the one who is or has died.

Bargaining is the third stage. It’s a way we try to gain some sense of control for ourselves, in reaction to a sense of vulnerability and helplessness. It often comes in the form of “if only”. There can be a bazillion if onlys. What’s interesting is even little kids know about bargaining. “if I go to bed on time, can we go to the park tomorrow? Another form of bargaining is “it should have been me instead”.

Depression often comes when we can no longer deny the truth of it all. We more fully feel the sadness, and possibly, the regret of what will not be. We tend to get quiet, pull our energy in, isolate ourselves. **Acceptance** is the last stage. This isn’t happy-land. This is the reframing of life in a new context. We learn to cope. We take our changed circumstances as a given.

There is so much to be said about this model. It’s rich if we pull it apart and apply it to the dynamics of loss. But I’ll simple point out that the 12 step and the Kubler-Ross model both begin by dealing with denial. That is not insignificant!

Both the loss and grief model and its numerous permutations, have been adapted for use in an organizational context. I want to highlight the one I found most profound and valuable. It too begins by addressing the issue of denial.

This model, says that the primary reason we have so much difficulty with transitions is that we deny they exist. We conceptualize change as a new beginning. We just move into the new house, the new job, the new relationship. We just parachute in to newness.

William Bridges, in his book, *Transitions*, tells us that **change begins with endings**. You have to sell the old house, leave the old job, and most people tend to terminate their prior relationship...but not all, before beginning a new one.

Change begins with endings. Once you have an ending, you then move into what he calls a **“neutral zone”**. The neutral zone includes confusion, unease, and distress. The new stove doesn't work the way the old one did. We burn things. You don't know your way around the grocery store or where to find the cleaners.

Eventually you acclimate to the change and you can in fact, begin. Bridges tells us there are four rules to transitions. 1. You find yourself coming back in new ways to old activities. 2. You have to let go of the old before we can pick up the new, not just outwardly, but inwardly. 3. It's very helpful to know how you tend to deal with endings, but some part of you will resist that knowledge as if your life depended on it. (How we deal with endings: are you one of the first to leave a party or are you one of the last to leave?) 4. We are likely to try to abort the three step process of endings, loss and beginnings. We often try to have beginnings first, then endings and then... we get lost and frightened, because we are left in no-man's land.

We need to acknowledge our own change process and allow for transitions. We need to let change happen over time. We need to accept that the new tends to come with some amount of disease. We need to trust that we will come out the other side just fine. And if not, we can always choose to begin, a new ending.

There's one more change model I'd like to present to you this morning. It's a model specific to creating change in an organizational setting. It's copy rights are held by Ibis Consulting Group.

The model is a simple four box model, with two boxes above and two below. The top axis is titled: “systems change”, meaning the way we do business, policies, procedures and the like. The side axis is called “individual change”. For each axis, there are two possibilities, no and yes. There can be no systems changes or yes to system changes. Ditto for individual change.

So, in the top left box, where there is no systems changes and no individual change, theoretically, there will be no change. In the top right box, with changes to the system but no individual change, you end up getting individual resistance and wasted systems.

The bottom left box, where there is no system changes but individuals change, the change ends up being short-lived, people become disappointed and cynical. The bottom right-side box, where there is both system changes and individual change, the change process becomes enduring and well supported.

This model tells us in order to have change that is enduring and well supported, you need to change both the way you do business and the people involved need to be willing to change.

This congregation is an organizational system. If we are to successfully navigate our transitions, we need to be smart about the way we do business and implement changes that work. But the other critical piece, maybe even the most important piece is the people involved, and that's all of us. We must be willing to change too. People must be willing to support the change strategies that are implemented in order for enduring change to take hold.

It all sounds pretty simple and in theory it is. The real work is in the doing.

And now, I would like to end so that the rest of our day may begin. For every thing there is a season. A time to speak and a time for me to be silent. May it be. Amen