

"I put a dollar in a change machine. Nothing changed." Comedian George Carlin's famous quip is rather prophetic. Change isn't easy, especially when it means assimilating into a new culture. Tourists do it when they land in a foreign country and learn the language and customs of a new place. Kids have to do it when they start a new school. A newly married husband

and wife have to make some big changes when they begin their new life together. And although at times the changes we make might not be permanent, change itself is a constant part of life. And wouldn't it be great if it only costed us a dollar!

Perhaps the hardest change, however, is moving or transforming an existing culture toward a new one. This is the kind of stuff that happens in organizations all the time and it's *always* a challenge. An organization gets used to doing things a certain way over time, and then a crisis develops -- whether it's an unexpected circumstance, a shift in market conditions, or even the arrival of a new leader.

Turning an old organization around to respond to change can be like steering the Titanic with icebergs all around. But while shifting a culture isn't easy, it's often the best thing for everyone in the long run. The shift has to be done with great skill and care, however, in order to bring everyone into a new vision and future.

When Jesus broke onto the scene in first-century Palestine, he came with an agenda for shifting a culture that had already been around for more than 1,000 years. He came as a new leader, a Messiah, and pointed to the crisis that had been plaguing the existing culture (really, all of human culture) since the very beginning. Even though he was God in the flesh, Jesus didn't simply snap his fingers or plunk a dollar in the change machine to make it happen.

Experts in culture change point to several key elements in helping people make the shift from old to new. In the cluster of passages in our Gospel this

morning surrounding and including the Transfiguration, we see Jesus using these elements to give his disciples a glimpse of the new culture he represents. They also foreshadow how they will help bring the good news of that culture to a world stuck in old paradigms and patterns of sin and death.

One key element in changing culture is to **cast a compelling new vision**. The way that Jesus will defeat evil is the way of the cross. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." This is literally a *cross-cultural* vision of how Jesus and his followers will change the world. Rather than visit death and vengeance on their enemies, the disciples of Jesus are to follow his example all the way to the cross, dying to their own desires and living a cruciform life. Jesus will take the forces of sin and death head on when he goes to the cross, and he will defeat them with forgiveness, with love and with his own suffering on behalf of the sinners who nailed him there.

In a world where violence and vengeance are the cultural norms for nations and individuals, Jesus casts a vision of a very different sort of culture. The culture of the cross calls us to suffering love, and nonviolent resistance to evil, trusting that God will ultimately set things right. Jesus casts the vision for how it all will come together in his glorious return and righteous judgment -- the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. In the meantime, his disciples are to keep taking up the cross and following his example.

This is a major culture shift that the church of Jesus Christ has trouble grasping. It's not about seeking power and dominance, but living as servants of the crucified Christ who loved his enemies. That's the culture of the kingdom of God that Jesus lays out in the Sermon on the Mount. It's a countercultural way of living that challenges every paradigm the old culture holds as truth, and it requires a

constant nurturing of the vision of Jesus to begin living it out. But while it's a new vision, it carries with it some of the best of the past. Jesus' vision didn't come from nowhere; rather, it is the product of a deep theological heritage that enabled him to bring it to reality at the right time. Indeed, this is the second key to changing culture, that is, **honoring the strengths of the existing culture.**

Matthew's gospel, written to a Jewish audience, constantly connects Jesus to Israel's past and to the towering figure of Moses in particular. From Christ's birth narrative, which have close parallels to Moses' own birth, to giving his updated revision of the law in a sermon on a mountain, Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the new Moses. In fact, you might say that the story of the Transfiguration continues that motif. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on another mountain "six days later," which Matthew's audience would have connected with Moses going up on Mount Sinai. Jesus is "transfigured" before the disciples, with his face shining "like the sun" -- much like Moses after his encounter with God on the mountain. Then Moses himself appears beside Jesus, along with the prophet Elijah.

In Jewish tradition, Moses and Elijah were transcendent figures who had not died but were taken directly to heaven. Their appearance with Jesus indicates that Jesus himself is part of that heavenly world, and the disciples get a glimpse of the glory Jesus had promised they would see. In another sense, however, Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Jesus, the Messiah, represents the fulfillment of both. The parallels between the three glorified figures there on the mountain are stunning. They were all rejected by their people; they were all advocates of the Torah; they all spoke the truth to kings; they spoke to God on behalf of their sinful people; and, perhaps most importantly, they all gave their lives for the sake of God and were vindicated by God.

The Transfiguration reveals that Jesus has a deep connection to Israel's story as both lawgiver and prophet, but that he is even more. He is not merely equal to

the two towering figures of Israel's history; he is superior to them. Matthew has already hinted at this in the Sermon on the Mount. "You heard it was said ... but I say to you" is Jesus' way of bringing his own authority over the law and the prophetic witness of the past. He doesn't abolish the law, but fulfills it in his own person and calls his followers to live not merely by the letter of the law but by its intent -- to demonstrate love for God and neighbor.

But the old culture dies hard, and it takes time for people to see what has changed. Peter, witnessing Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah, wants to build three "dwelling places" or tabernacles to commemorate and prolong this amazing vision of Israel's past glory. Jesus does not answer Peter's exuberance; instead, the glory of God overshadows them in a cloud and God's own voice speaks the same words spoken at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" God confirms Peter's confession from a few days earlier when he had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah and confirms that Jesus himself is the true tabernacle -- Emmanuel, "God with us."

The Transfiguration is a foretaste of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The disciples won't really understand it until that future event has taken place, thus Jesus tells them to tell no one about it until after they discover the empty tomb. It will take time to assimilate this culture shift, and we can argue that the church has been wrestling with it to this day. People need constant reminding that the culture has changed, which brings us to our third and final principle:

Another key element to leading a change in culture is to continue communicating and incorporating the vision. Change experts tell us that shifting a culture involves multiple modes of communication, and the development of new habits in the organization. Poor communication and failure to assimilate cultural changes in everyday life and work, on the other hand, can lead the culture "back to Egypt" and the familiar patterns of the past. Jesus held the cross up in front of his

disciples, constantly reminding them that the way of the cross is the way to God's glorious future.

Most of our churches have the symbol of the cross put up everywhere, but it can become as ubiquitous as the wallpaper on our walls, if we're not incorporating it into our daily lives. We tend to focus on Jesus' own death and resurrection in glory, but often we forget that we've been called to follow him in a culture of sacrifice, service, and suffering love.

The church is often resistant to that culture shift, preferring comfort and cultural accommodation to countercultural living. Sometimes we need to return to the mountain to be reminded that Jesus is Lord, and that his lordship is a product of suffering on behalf of others, even those who are not like us, or who may even be against us. We also recognize, however, that we can't stay on the mountain secure in the tabernacles of our doctrines and knowledge about Jesus. Eventually, we must follow him down into the valley and confront evil with the faith he gives us, and with the way of the cross ever before us.

Shifting a culture isn't easy. It takes time and constant nurture. But, when we make the *cross*-cultural shift to follow the crucified, glorified Christ, however, we will see him -- and everything -- in a brand new way. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.