

If you had to make some big changes in your life today in order to avoid death tomorrow, could you do it? Statistics say there's a 9 to 1 probability that you can't. Well...if that's the case, then how does lasting change happen? In our Old Testament lesson for today, Jeremiah writes, "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors ... ". A new covenant. A new contract. A chance to change. Israel was at a crossroads, and whatever choice was made, nothing would ever be the same again.

When I first read this story, knowing that I would be preaching on Reformation Day, I began to think of the changes that took place in the Church after Luther nailed his 95 thesis to that door in Wittenberg. Included among those changes were such things as allowing laity to receive the cup and not just the bread during communion, permitting priests to be married, recognizing the authority of the Bible as opposed to that of the pope, dropping prayers offered to the saints, and the #1 game changer, the rejection of good works as a means of salvation. Like the Israelites in our first lesson, Luther and the other Reformers were at a crossroads in their lives, and they too would enter into a renewed covenant with God, with new understandings of salvation and a new theological understanding called justification by faith.

Thankfully things were different for the Reformers than they were for the "house of Judah!" When reading scripture time and time again we witness the Israelites' apparent and consistent reluctance to change, I will give you some examples of their stubbornness in a bit, but before I do let's review our own attitude toward change.

Imagine that your doctor calls you up one day and tells you, "I've got some good news and bad news. The bad news is that you're going to die within a month. The good news, is that if you significantly change your lifestyle right now and for

the next month and beyond, you'll live a long and happy life.” Could you make the change? Could you perform a U-turn and go another direction with your life? After all, this is a real choice for many people, so you'd think the odds would be fairly high, especially if you were told that if you don't change, you'll die.

So, if a crisis like impending and imminent death can't force us to change, are we completely lost? Are we doomed to ultimate failure? No! The good news is that change *does* work for some people and institutions. There are people, few though they may be, who are able to engage in lasting, healthy change for themselves and their families or organizations. Change is tough, but not impossible. So how do we do it???

The answer lies in understanding the nature of change itself. Part of the problem is that we most often view change as something we *do* — an activity or habit that must be altered. We tend to approach change issues; such as heart disease or other behaviors, with facts, analysis and information — with the left brain. We *think* about changing something in ourselves, but thinking is only one part of the process.

What we're missing, says John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor and expert on change, is the right brain. “Behavior change happens mostly by speaking to people's feelings. In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problems or solutions available to them in ways that influence their emotions, not just their thoughts.”

Dr. Dean Ornish, a founder of a research Institute in California, agrees. Rather than tell a heart patient to change or die...Ornish focuses on helping them tap into their emotions. He realizes that death is often too frightening for most people, and this can cause them to experience denial and depression. And if someone is feeling extremely sick and depressed, would they really want to live longer? On the other hand, Ornish seeks to convince his patients that feeling better

is the goal, believing that those who feel better live longer. “Joy is a more powerful motivator than fear,” he says.

What experts on change have discovered, is something that God has known all along. If you really want to change people’s behavior, you need to give them a story, an identity, a relationship that is “emotionally significant.” This is something we try to do together as a Christian family here at First Lutheran! In the past few years I’ve developed some rather strong emotional bonds to many of you, and I have witnessed the compassion you have for one another when we worship together, have fellowship together, when we serve together on different committees, and as we explore the good news of the loving relationship that God offers us together!

In Jeremiah 31, we read how God seeks to reframe the experience of a people notoriously resistant to change by offering them not another set of rules, but a relationship. It’s no secret that God’s chosen were, and are, resistant to change. Go back to Exodus and you’ll see that even after God had brought them out of their slavery in Egypt, the people began to fight the change and wanted to go back — the known being far less uncomfortable than the unknown, even if it was being whipped while making bricks! At Sinai, God framed for them a covenant on tablets of stone — clear directions and rules for change, which they immediately began to ignore as they danced around a golden calf.

Repeatedly throughout their history, both as the nation of Israel and as the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, God’s people have a hard time really buying into the change that’s good for them, and are constantly wanting to be like those around them, their idols and pagan practices being the dominant frame of the day. Even when they are threatened with exile, destruction and death, they can’t seem to make the change and follow God for any consistent length of time.

So here, in Jeremiah, we read that God is going to take the initiative to reframe the issue and call for real change. The old covenant, the one at Sinai, the one written on tablets of stone was, in effect, a left-brained approach to change — facts, information, commandments. That covenant was broken because the people couldn't adapt themselves to it fully, they couldn't conform. Like an addict who tries hard to bolster the willpower to change, the people of God were powerless to make those difficult lifestyle changes on their own.

So, God turns to another approach. Rather than write out another legal prescription, or warn them of impending doom, God will “put his law within them, and will write it on their hearts; and he will be their God, and they shall be his people.” The program of change he will offer them won't be carried around in a box, written in a book, or posted on a church door, but will be installed in their “hearts” — their emotions, their hopes and dreams. God was updating the covenant, reframing the relationship, moving from commandments to conversation, from rules to relationship. No longer would they simply know *about* God as an external agent who calls for their obedience, but they would *know* God with their emotions, their hearts, and their very lives. God was offering a new opportunity for the people to change from a pattern of failure to a relationship of forgiveness.

Jesus would later embody this new covenant, this reframing of the story. While the Pharisees and others around him would continually press for the rules, Jesus was constantly calling people to engage God through a relationship rather than through religious ritual. He said, essentially, to know me is to know God — to follow me is to follow a new path, and to be in God's presence, to experience God's grace is the way to real change. He painted a picture of a future filled with joy for those who would be transformed in this way.

In other words, Jesus made change a LIVE option ... even changing the threat of death itself to the promise of a resurrection life. Problem is that many individuals, churches, and religious organizations are still working with old frames. The constant debates in our churches about rules, religious practices, theology, and sin keep us firmly entrenched. We talk a lot, argue a lot, generate tons of information, but nothing seems to change and, worse yet, the lives of God's people don't change much either.

Perhaps it is time then to embrace a new story, another covenant — the one God has been calling us toward all along. God wants us to *know* him, not just argue about what we know *about* him. God's word through Jeremiah is a call for us to move from the left brain to the right brain, from our heads to our hearts, from religion to a relationship with God. Just imagine how that can change our spirits, our selves, and our churches!

The Israelites in Jeremiah's story are at a Crossroads. Similarly, like the Reformers of the early Church I believe that we are all at a crossroads as we seek to understand the different ways we are called to live out God's mission together as the body of Christ, and in our everyday lives! Perhaps we need to enter into a new Covenant with God, or renew the Covenant that was made in our baptisms, or on our confirmation day? Promises that include living among God's faithful people, hearing the word of God, sharing in the Lord's supper, proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through words and actions, and striving for justice and peace in all the earth? Which begs the question, will we choose to live out these sacred vows and allow God to continue to transform us, to make changes in our lives throughout our walk of faith? Will we see this as new beginning, a chance to learn more about God as we dive even deeper into our relationship with Christ?

To help us embrace this new change, or renewal of our faith, and to help that change or renewal be something that will last, perhaps we need to connect with our

emotions and be reminded of the relationship that God is offering us! A relationship with a loving heavenly Father, who is always there for us unconditionally, no matter what we do, pouring out everlasting love, inspiration, encouragement, forgiveness, and grace! Perhaps we need to be reminded of Jesus' words in John's Gospel, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free!" I encourage you to keep spending time learning about God, keep a hold of the relationships you have formed with the people in this congregation and the individuals who have inspired you to believe!

On this Reformation day, whether you chose to re-Affirm your faith like our Confirmation students will be doing shortly, and you decide to enter into a new covenant with God, or whether you are just here to worship, I pray that you would embrace this day and see it as a new chapter, or a renewal of your faith life! After all, I encourage you to never forget that God is calling you by name, he wants us to know you, and wants you to know him. And Thanks be to God for that! AMEN