

## Ministers of Change

Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

Jennie Ott ☩ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC ☩ 8 February 2009  
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I heard an interesting quip this week from a friend. She said:

Life is like a roll of toilet paper. The closer you get to the end, the faster it goes.

I think that's a little bit how I'm feeling, not just because I'm nearing the end of my time with you, but because together we have been through so many changes in the past year, and they have come faster than we might have liked.

A year ago, probably like many of you, I never would have guessed that Tom, our music minister of 15 years, would be gone. Or that Eric, our Principal Minister of 16 years, would be gone. Or that we would be enjoying the fruits of a new music minister and receiving the gifts of an Interim Minister.

Frankly, it's a lot of change in a very short period of time, especially when you figure in four months, I too will say goodbye to you. And then within the year you'll be welcoming a new Associate Minister and a new Principal Minister.

It reminds me of that old saying: the only thing constant in life is change.

And it seems true, not only here, but in our country, in our world, in all areas of our lives.

Sometimes change is slow, but often it comes when we least expect it. Just when we think we have our finances in order, the economy drops out from under us. Just when we think our family is safe and sound, we find out someone is sick. Just when we thought we wouldn't get that job, they actually do hire us. Just when we're sure things can't get any better, or any worse, somehow they do.

Change is a sure thing in life, and whether we are the type to embrace it or resist it, chances are it causes us some grief, too.

Any change, any transition, even good ones like a new child or a new job, usually come hand-in-hand with some sense of loss or confusion, some need to lament and celebrate and let go of what was, some bewilderment at trying to figure out what is, some mix of hope and trepidation for what will be.

I imagine most of you experience that in your own lives. I think we are experiencing it in our country, and I know it's happening here at First Church.

As I listen to your voices, I can tell you that we are all over the map, which is not so uncommon when faced with such huge changes. Some of us are deeply grieving both Tom and Eric, missing their gifts, missing their passions, missing their unique mannerisms.

Having worked so closely with Eric, I miss the Guatemalan shirts, the poetic prayers, and the way he used to take me out for a cup of coffee and some good counsel. It's not the same without him here, and it's okay to acknowledge that.

At the same time, some of us glad for the change, and that's okay to acknowledge, too. Some of us can't wait to see where the church is heading or who our new minister will be. We want to beef up some

ministries and bring new people in the doors. I put myself in this camp, too, and am excited to see what missions our church embraces in the coming years, to see where God leads us in the future.

And then there are lots of us just in the moment, trying to take it all in. Some of us feel a bit overwhelmed and unsure, trying to make sense of what's happening. And others are seasoned and relaxed, knowing that we will weather the transition and all will be well.

We may find ourselves in one place more than another, or moving back and forth. Different days, we may be in different places, and that is fine. Grief and sorrow and hope and change run their own course in each one of us.

I think the bigger question for us now is what do we do with all of this change? How do we make sense out of it? And how do we help each other through it?

This is where our gospel reading might help us, because the people in this story know a thing or two about change.

Mark is an action-packed gospel. While the other gospel writers warm us up a bit – opening with a long genealogy, or some fun birth narratives, or a rich theological introduction – Mark has Jesus hit the ground running. Change comes quick. We're not even out of Chapter 1, and already John has baptized Jesus, Jesus has spent 40 days in the wilderness and then returned to Galilee, called the first disciples, and begun preaching and teaching.

And a day in the life of Jesus is no less busy – preaching and healing in the synagogue, returning to a friend's house for supper only to heal the friend's mother-in-law, crowds banging at the door, demanding Jesus' attention. Even when Jesus tries to sneak off for a moment of quiet, he can't catch a break. Pretty soon the disciples are out there, saying, "Hey, everyone is looking for you."

It's a staggering amount of change for all of them, Jesus included. One day Jesus is simply a country carpenter. Within two months, his fame has spread across the land.

It's similar for the disciples. One minute they know themselves as simple fishermen. The next minute they've traded their nets and hooks for the business of crowd control and public relations.

Even Simon's mother-in-law probably doesn't know what hit her, going from her bed one minute to feeding countless villagers the next.

It is a whirlwind. There is no time to get used to the change. No time to be sad, or be hopeful, or be much of anything, because there is too much to do.

And there are certainly some who feel that's happening here at First Church. Because life goes on and there are ministries to do and positions to hire, it's hard to stop and reflect on where we've been and where we're going.

I imagine that's what Jesus was trying to do when he snuck away for a little bit. Just catch his breath, stop for a minute, and try to center himself. Who knows what he prayed, but I imagine it was something like,  
"What have I gotten myself into? Help me God, help me find myself in the midst of all of this.  
Ground me and give me strength."

For Jesus, for the disciples, their lives as they had known them were over. They could not return to their old ways of being and doing, now that they were part of this new movement, this new church. I imagine many late night conversations, tinged with nostalgia, as they remembered back to days of fishing,

wondering if and how they could ever be there again. Even in the midst of the excitement, there were likely moments of profound grief, for all that they had given up.

It's okay for us to have those moments, too.

It's okay even with Jim here and Cynthia here and me here, to stop and to say over coffee and even in worship that we miss Eric, or Tom, or Christina, and that we miss who we were as church with them. Those relationships were good and real, and naming them is part of our collective grief and part of our grieving process.

At the same time, there's something else for us in this story from Mark, too. You see, this story isn't just about a leader. It isn't just about Jesus, or Jesus' ministry, or Jesus' pace, or the expectations that everyone had for him.

This story is really about the church, the church in transition, and just as each person has his or her own way of coping with change, each person also has a particular role to play in the midst of it.

In this story, isn't up to Jesus to do all the preaching and teaching and healing and hospitality. It was all of them, working together. When Jesus and the disciples were exhausted after a day of teaching in the synagogue, it was Simon who opened up his house to them and gave them a place to stay. When Simon's mother in law was sick, it was the disciples who brought the news to Jesus and saw that she got healed. When the crowds gathered in, it was Simon's mother-in-law who then got up and started hosting the guests.

They took turns, getting what they needed from one another in terms of strength, but then serving and encouraging each other along the way. They didn't just cope with change, then, they actually grew in the midst of it—in faith and in numbers—because they worked together and took care of another.

It's not a hard stretch to find ourselves in their place. Some of us feel a little sick from all this change and need some healing before we can get up and serve. Some of us already there, ready to get up and at 'em, welcoming new people into our community. Some of us just want to sit for a while, like the crowd, and be fed and healed and taught. Some of us, like Jesus, maybe just want a moment to ourselves, to pray, to regroup. And some of us, like the disciples, want to prod the rest of us along, saying, "Come on, what are we waiting for? The world needs us."

Change brings about all of these responses, but maybe what is clearest here is that we need each other. We need to work together and support one another, for when we do, we ensure that we not only survive transition but thrive in it.

And by "we," I really mean "you."

If you look at the back of your bulletin, you'll see what I mean. The top line says it all. You are the ministers of this church. You are the leaders. Those lines below—Jim's name, my name—they are secondary, and they are changing. This time next year, those names will be different, but you will still be the ministers.

So really, this community is in your hands. It is yours to nurture. It is yours to lead. It is you who will feed one another and heal one another. It is you who will help each other remember the way things were and envision with one another who you want to be.

You, with God, are the heart and soul of this church. It's not Eric or Tom. It's not Jim or me or Cynthia or Sandy. And it won't be the new people either.

You are the church. You are First Church. And it's you, together with God, who will make this church what it will be in the years to come.

It's such a dynamic time in the life of our community – full of grief, yes, for all the changes, but full of hope and possibility, too.

Wherever you are in the journey of change, know you are welcome here and you have a role to play here.

So go ahead and be sad. Be glad. Be hopeful. Be hospitable. And go ahead and heal and teach and preach. For you are the ministers, and you are the church.

Amen.