

"CHALLENGED BY CHANGE"Luke 5:27-39**THEME:** Christ's agenda requires changes in relationships and structures.**DATE:** 05/20/07

Dr. John Crocker, First Evangelical Free Church, Rockford, IL.

President Woodrow Wilson said, "If you want to make enemies, try to change something."
We find comfort in sticking to old patterns of doing things.

- There's a poem about this by Sam Walter Foss:
*One day through the primeval wood, a calf walked home as good calves should;
But made a trail all bent askew, a crooked trail as calves all do.
Since then three hundred years have fled, and I infer the calf is dead.
But still he left behind his trail, and thereby hangs my moral tale.
The trail was taken up next day by a lone dog that passed that way;
And then a wise bellwether sheep pursued the trail o'er vale and steep
And drew the flock behind him too, as good bellwethers always do.
And from that day, o'er hill and glade, through these old woods a path was made.
And many men wound in and out, and dodged and turned and bent about.
And uttered words of righteous wrath because t'was such a crooked path;
But still they followed—do not laugh—the first migrations of that calf.
This forest path became a lane that bent and turned and turned again.
This crooked lane became a road, where many a poor horse with his load
Toiled on beneath the burning sun and traveled some three miles in one.
And thus a century and a half they trod the footsteps of that calf.
The years passed on in swiftness fleet; the road became a village street;
And this, before men were aware, a city's crowded thoroughfare.
And soon the central street was this of a renowned metropolis.
And men two centuries and a half trod in the footsteps of that calf.
A hundred thousand men were led by one calf near three centuries dead.
For men are prone to go it blind along the calf-paths of the mind,
And work away from sun to sun to do what other men have done.
They follow in the beaten track, and out and in, and forth and back;
And still their devious course pursue, to keep the path that others do.
They keep the path a sacred groove along which all their lives they move.
But how the wise old wood gods laugh who saw the first primeval calf!*

The familiar usually feels safer. Change can be scary.

- In a little book entitled, *Sojourners in the Land of Promise*, Charles Wilson addresses our natural inclination to hold on to the old order of things: *An egg has form, structure, perhaps color—it makes sense as an egg. It does what an egg is supposed to do. But when the new life form inside is ready to emerge, the old form has to be shattered. When the larger, more complex life form that is struggling to be reaches a certain point, the old, valid for its time and purpose, has to go. Now picture someone seeing the egg begin to crack, grabbing the scotch tape and trying desperately to tape the thing together—to preserve it—to maintain the old order. That's the picture I see: you and me running around with scotch tape trying to patch up the old forms to suit our models, resisting the new which seems to represent chaos. In a way, what it finally comes down to is the question of maintaining (the old order) versus creating order.* (Charles S. Wilson, *Sojourners in the Land of Promise*. p.36)

Have you ever contemplated how disruptive Jesus was to the old order?

Practically everything we learn about Jesus Christ from the Bible is punctuated by change. He changed the world. Jesus upset social and religious conventions.

- As Jesus went about teaching and healing and changing lives, the religious establishment became alarmed as the power of Jesus' life caused cracks in their tidy old religious forms. They took desperate action to try to keep Jesus from shattering their sacred system. But Jesus was too much to contain. He even blew death to smithereens!
- All that had been germinating throughout the generations—incubating in God's dealings with mankind—emerged as something new and amazing and powerful.

The mystery hidden for ages had been revealed—God's gift of forgiveness and new life through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior.

- In our text today Luke describes some attempts by the religious authorities to stop Jesus. They saw their safe old religious order slipping out of their control.

The most thorough change in your life is what happens to you when you turn from your sins and put your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

The Apostle Paul explained it best. *'If anyone is in Christ (believes in Christ, accepts Christ and becomes a Christian) he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!'* (2 Corinthians 5:17)

This is exactly what our Mission Statement says: Our purpose is to *bring people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.*

This demolishes the old, safe, self-serving structures people cling to. It's not neat and tidy and comfortable!

A healthy church experiences a constant infusion of spiritual energy. It will not and cannot be comfortable and predictable.

In our text today, Luke 5:27-39, Jesus Christ reveals some timeless **principles** that govern every healthy church today.

I. TRANSFORMATION INSTEAD OF CONFORMITY (5:27-32)

If a church forgets or neglects God's purpose for it, it starts to die. The members become more concerned about people conforming to their respectable religious customs than about people becoming transformed by God's power.

- Jesus was almost always with people who make religious folk uncomfortable. He said he didn't come into the world to hobnob with religious folk. Listen as I read it:

²⁷ *After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him,*

²⁸ *and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.*

²⁹ *Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.*

³⁰ *But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

³¹ *Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.*

³² *I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*

Jesus abominated the haughtiness of self-righteous religious leaders.

- If sinners didn't seek Jesus out, Jesus sought them out.

That's what Jesus did with Levi. (He's also called Matthew. See Matthew 9:9).

Levi was an Israelite who collected taxes for the Roman governor.

The people of Judea and Galilee hated Levi and his kind as traitors and treated them as detestable social parasites.

The religious leaders would have sent Levi straight to hell if it was in their power to do so.

People were shocked when Jesus called Levi to be a disciple.

That would be like inviting a pimp to be a pastoral intern here at First Free.

Jesus knew what the upright and uptight Pharisees and teachers of the law were grumbling about to his disciples.

So he asked, "What good is a doctor who hates sick people?" Jesus didn't come for proud people who called themselves righteous. He came to call sinners to repentance.

- When Jesus called Levi to follow him, did he tell him to break all his ties with his old buddies?

No! Levi got all his crooked old tax cronies together. Then he invited Jesus to join them.

Jesus still prefers Levi's way.

You can invite people to come and meet Jesus here as we worship him. That's good.

But it's even better to introduce Jesus to them when you meet with them at work or school or in your neighborhood.

Then later on bring them here with you to worship him.

- That's what will happen if we are truly more concerned about people's lives being changed by Jesus than we are about people conforming to our comfortable, respectable religious ways.

That's an important principle that governs a healthy church. It goes all the way back to Jesus himself.

[2nd timeless principle that governs every healthy church today]

II. ORGANISM ABOVE ORGANIZATION (5:33-39)

If you've been with us for a while, you may have heard me say that the church as a spiritual organism is much more important than the church as a social organization. It's both, but the organization exists to serve the organism—the living, spiritual body of Christ.

If organizational matters become the passion of the people of a church, that church cannot and will not be healthy. It's that clear and simple.

- You can tell a lot about the spiritual health of church people if they get all adrenalized about traditions and governance and structures and they never show any passion about reaching the lost.

You may be thinking, "John, shouldn't you say that a bit more diplomatically, because governance structures are a bit of a controversy here at First Free right now?"

I am much more committed to saying it plainly and clearly because I will have to answer to God for speaking truth, even if it is uncomfortable.

- Organizational structures are important. That's why we're having an informational forum about them this afternoon. We must make sure that we have organizational and governance structures that help the spiritual organism—the body of Christ—to be and to do all that Christ intends.

Governance structures based on distrust and fear constantly compel members to focus on the organization instead of on the spiritual organism—the body of Christ.

We have an obligation before God to make sure that our energy and our church's passion is directed to loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; and to loving other people as ourselves—so that we reach out to them with the love of Christ; so that we will see Christ's virtues—the fruit of the Spirit in each other's lives—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

These are the priorities in a healthy church, which is the living spiritual body of Christ. And this must be visible to everybody.

- The Pharisees and teachers of the law were traditionalists. Their teaching and preaching was basically quoting great Rabbis of the past. They were more familiar with the traditions of the Rabbis than they were the Scriptures.

George MacDonald says this about a character in one of his novels: "Helen had supposed she could think because the thoughts of other people had passed through her quite regularly, leaving many a phantom conclusion behind. But this had been their thinking, not hers." (*The Curate's Awakening*, p.15)

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were like that. They didn't think much for themselves. They were just watchdogs guarding the old forms set up by past Rabbis.

- Look at the way they reacted to Jesus' apparent disregard of their cherished way of doing things.

³³ *They said to him, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."*

³⁴ *Jesus answered, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?"*

³⁵ *But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."*

³⁶ *He told them this parable: "No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old.*

³⁷ *And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined.*

³⁸ *No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins.*

³⁹ *And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, "The old is better."*

Jesus spoke about the threadbare fabric of the old religious traditions and the brittle goatskin wine containers of the old covenant. Neither of these could hold the dynamic new life Jesus gave to people.

- Do you think this applies to structures and traditions in a church today? Yes, it most assuredly does apply.

This applies to any tradition, practice, governance structure, form, or program that hinders in any way the power of Christ's life being expressed in and through his body, the church.

- The energy of the Spirit of Christ in his church is always stretching his people.

If church members focus their energies on protecting the familiar and the safe, they are in grave danger of the Holy Spirit departing from their church.

If we expect the Holy Spirit to do in us and through us what God wants, we must get out of our comfort zone—that's an over-used expression, but it fits perfectly here.

- In the Civil War General George B. McClellan was commander of the Union Forces. He was criticized for playing a waiting game and not pressing his advantage over the Confederate troops. He received this letter: "My dear McClellan, if you do not want to use the Army, I should like to borrow it for a while. Yours respectfully, Abraham Lincoln."

A church that turns its attention to comfort and the safety of the familiar will become of little use to God.

- This is not a suggestion: we must pledge ourselves to be and to do exactly what God wants, and not try to protect what we like.

This is one of the simplest and most basic of Christian truths, but it fades out of focus so quickly and easily if we neglect it.

This afternoon we're having another information meeting about proposed governance structures. It's to hear and to be heard. No final decision will be made today.

We are all invited to look at some proposals; imperfect proposals, but worthy proposals for our consideration.

- It's an important meeting because it's about our organization that is supposed to assist, and support, and release all the power of the spiritual organism, the body of Christ.

I am praying that as a church we will adopt governance structures that are simple, kind, and that rely on Christ-like love and trust among brothers and sisters in Christ. I believe that's what it takes for a church to be what God commands it to be and to do what Christ has commanded it to do.

- It's all about life change.

Yesterday morning when I was on my knees in prayer in my study the phone rang. It was a man I had met some time ago. He was in an institution. He was very anxious about the crimes he had committed. He wanted to know if God could forgive him or if hell was his unavoidable destiny. He listed a number of the most horrible things that he had done, and he was in despair under a load of guilt. You've now idea what a thrill it was to tell him about how powerful the work of Jesus Christ on the cross was. He wanted to know if Hitler had sincerely repented of all his sins, would God have forgiven. I could assure him that; yes! Absolutely! That's what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. It's that powerful. We prayed, and something was different. He called back a little while later with some more questions, because he wanted to be sure. It was so good to hear the gratitude in his voice.

That is what Christ's church is all about—being people who are thrilled by that kind of assurance, and people who reach out to spiritually-lost people with that message.