

Sermon: For Everything a Season

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Many years ago I read about a congregation in conflict over whether or not to change the existing pews to chairs. Some people were resolutely for the change: chairs allow for more flexible seating arrangements and activities, they argued; they are easier to stack and move; they are more modern and less stodgy; and they are just plain more comfortable to sit on. Others were against the change: the pews are traditional, part of the congregation's history, beautifully crafted. One woman was particularly adamant that pews it had always been and pews it should always be.

While the pews versus chairs question is not our most pressing one at the moment — we'd probably be happy with either if it meant we could be meeting regularly and comfortably in a new church home — the tension is familiar. We, too, know what it is to have people eager for a change and people wanting things to stay the same. We, too, know what it is to have conflict about how best to move forward with a decision. As a congregation, yes, and also as people - people in relationships and friendships and organizations and communities. How many of you have ever agonized or argued in your own home about the best colour to repaint, whether or not to move, when is the best time to make a major life change or transition? Sat through a contentious board or committee meeting, here or elsewhere? Been on the winning and also on the losing side of a vote? Debated whether to have chicken or steak or tofu for dinner? Or some other major or minor or even trivial life decision?

Ecclesiastes, the source of our song and reading today, is a book in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Christian tradition it is part of what is called the Wisdom Literature. Scholars of Ecclesiastes vary widely in their interpretation of the book, unsure whether it is orthodox or heterodox (i.e. fitting or not with tradition), optimistic or pessimistic, internally coherent or not, wise or foolish, faithful to God or not, among other things. It is a book of deep questions and exploration of wisdom and its application to our lives.

This rings true for the passage from Ecclesiastes 3: For everything there is a season. Indeed, there is. Nevertheless, it is still a challenging passage. Not all parts: A time to be born and a time to die, a time to sow and a time to reap, a time to break down and a time to build up - and many more — are easy to affirm; of course life brings all of those things in turn to each of us. Some are harder: a time to kill, a time for war, a time for hate. Is that really what I believe? What we believe? What people of faith — Christian, Jewish, or any other faith tradition — believe? Is it prescriptive - there should be time for hate and killing and war? Or descriptive - there inevitably is time in this world where hate and killing and war reign? I don't know. Nor is the scholarship conclusive. Like many scriptural passages from around the world, interpretation is ambiguous and subjective.

But whether prescriptive or descriptive, it is thus far true of our world. The most beautiful and most abhorrent things coexist every day on this earth, as does everything in between. On the smaller scale of our congregational life, the reading might go:

For everything there is a season:

A time for hard work, a time for rest.

A time for accord, a time for discord;

A time for comfort, a time for challenge;

A time for growth, a time for decline;

A time for joy, a time for grief;

A time to preserve, a time for change;

A time for hellos, a time for goodbyes.

This is a time of significant upheaval in our world in and in our congregation. We have all lived in more isolation and separateness over the last year and a half than we ever could have anticipated two years ago. We don't all have the same perspectives on the 8th principle or covid policies. We are still homeless as a congregation, our hymnals and pulpit and other items in storage. And soon there will be a ministerial transition as well, as I move on to new things with my family. Change can be exciting and emotional, and bring grief and worry and relief, sometimes in equal measure. I am sure there is and will continue to be much in the mix as we navigate these transitions together over the next two months, and as you continue to navigate them after my departure. There is no perfect time for leaving; when everything is easy, it is hard to let go; when everything is hard, it's also hard to let go before reaching a resolution. Inevitably, with any leaving there is a mix of things, and tasks left incomplete.

In the midst of all of this season, I want to come back to two things: First is the story of the congregation in conflict over the old wooden pews. As the conflict continued and no consensus emerged, eventually the minister sat down with the woman who was most adamant about keeping the pews. As they talked she began crying: her mother had recently died, and the pew in which she sat each week was the one she had often shared with her mother, sitting and praying and singing side by side in worship, in a congregation they loved. This deeper story and connection shifted the conversation in the congregation, from "for" and "against" pews and pros and cons and expense of chairs, to one of how to tend what was important: to preserve some of the beauty and tradition of the pews and at the same time increase the comfort and flexibility to the sanctuary space. A compromise was found, including the keeping of some of the pews and dedication of one, the special one, to the woman's mother with a plaque. Conflict and indecision gave way to reconnection and creativity.

The other story I want to come back to is the one about the horse that I shared in my last sermon: The farmer whose horse runs away one day, and then comes back with 3 wild horses the next; one of which throws his son the following day, breaking his leg, and then his injured son is passed over for army recruitment soon after. Each time his neighbours exclaim over his misfortune or good luck, and the farmer simply shrugs and says: "Maybe. We'll see."

In the midst of conflict and turmoil and change, it can feel like things are falling apart, and like Humpty Dumpty, that they may never be put back together again. It's a natural feeling. We cannot control everything that happens to us and in our world, but we can choose how we respond. Thus the humility and wisdom of "maybe, we'll see" — not judging things too quickly as good or bad — along with the intentional tending of relationship can lead to reconciliation and healing, to new possibilities and new beauty. Anger and defensiveness can give way to curiosity and care. Rather than tearing us apart, our deeper fears and hopes and convictions can ultimately bring us closer to one another and help us find creative solutions. We can have the chairs and dedicate a pew or two. Sometimes it isn't that simple, but the same process of listening and care for one another can still lead to unimagined solutions and meaningful connections. Like the Japanese art of Kintsugi, where broken pottery is mended with melted gold, we may become most beautiful not in spite of but because of our healing from our wounds and conflicts and cracks.

I cannot predict the future, but in this I trust:

That this congregation will continue to be one of love, connection, growth, and challenge.

That people will come and go, and ministers will come and go, and that all who pass through our congregation, and those who stay, will be welcomed wholeheartedly, imperfectly, and hopefully, ever more intentionally while they are here and equally so if and when it is time to go.

That there will be times when people want change and others want things to stay the same.

That there will be conflicts and healing, building up and tearing down, sewing and reaping of seeds of change.

That there will be tears of grief and tears of joy, times of laughter and playfulness and song and fun.

I also trust that, as we travel the seasons, our beauty will change from that of full foliage to falling leaves to empty branches to shimmering icicles to new buds, again and again and again.

This congregation is a blessing.

It has always been so.

May it always be so.

Amen.