

CHANGE: It's Not Just About Sofas!
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

"That's right. The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant even though I did my part as their Master." God's Decree.

"This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them C write it on their hearts! C and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They'll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I'll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I'll forget they ever sinned!" God's Decree.

Maybe none of you ever had to search in the sofa looking for loose change. I can remember learning that trick when I was a boy, because I could regularly find \$.50 or so. But it came in handy once when I was in college and I managed to find \$4.00 in change in my sofa.

But that is not the type of change that I am talking about. The prophet Jeremiah wrote:

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(Jeremiah 31:31-33 The Message)

A new covenant.
A new contract.

A chance to change.

When the prophet Jeremiah wrote these words, Israel was at a crossroads, and whatever choice they made, nothing would ever be the same.

In hindsight, it is easy for us to look at the story in Jeremiah and ask — WHY, why wouldn't they change?

God showed them the way.
God offered them a season of change.

But before we're too hard on the "house of Judah" and its apparent and consistent reluctance to change its ways, let's review our own attitude toward change.

A doctor calls you one day and tells you:

"I've got good news and bad news. Bad news is that you're going to die within a month. 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 turn your life around and go another direction?

A man goes to the doctor.

"You, are in terrible shape. You've got to do something about it. First, tell your wife to cook more nutritious meals. Stop working like a dog. Also, inform your wife you're going to make a budget, and she has to stick to it. And have her keep the kids off your back so you can relax. Unless there are some changes like that in your life, you'll probably be dead in a month."

"Doc," the patient said, "this would sound more official coming from you. Could you please call my wife and give her those instructions?"

When the man gets home, his wife rushes to him.

"I talked to your doctor, he says that you've only got 30 days to live."

This is not simply a illustration for a sermon — this is a real choice for many, many people. And you'd think the odds of changing would be fairly high, especially if you were told that if you don't change, you'll die.

You'd change wouldn't you?

Unfortunately, if you got this message from your doctor, “Change or die,” odds are 9 to 1 that you won’t.

I’ll change, I’ll be different!

And of course, you’ll begin to make those changes in lifestyle, eating habits, recreational pursuits and so on. But it’s not long before your enthusiasm tapers off, and soon you’re back to square one. No change. No chance.

Don’t believe me?

People who’ve had heart bypass surgery, most definitely a life-and-death matter, are directed by their doctors to change their eating habits, stop smoking, exercise, significantly alter their lifestyle. They know they should make those changes — know that they’ll die sooner than later if they don’t — yet multiple studies have shown that in just two years after such major surgery, 90 percent of these patients have not significantly altered their behavior. Change is just too tough.

But this is not just a health related issue.

It’s also a major issue for many businesses, where companies go belly-up every day still chanting the mantra, “We’ve always done it this way.”

Corporations spend millions each year on consultants to suggest new practices and promote change, but any changes made are, at best, short-lived and, at worst, rejected out of hand.

And, one of the most resistant institutions to change is the church.

Sure we’ve got contemporary worship (whatever that means), but we still understand the Bible and God with a first century mind set. Moving our understanding of God to the 21st century is just too painful. And so we are content to claim a God that we really can’t believe in.

And the result of that failure — churches are closing every day. All we need to do is look around the room and find too many of us that are refugees from churches that closed, or are getting close to it!

I have friends, who are no longer pastors, because they made some drastic changes with the church — drastic things like moving a piano or a pulpit.

It’s like that old joke.

Question: How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb?

Answer: What do you mean, change, what’s wrong with the one that is

there?!

We can't blame our inability, or our unwillingness to change on a lack of information. We have all the information that we need at our fingertips to see and understand WHY and HOW we must change — And that is true whether we are talking about our personal health care issues, our business practices, or our churches.

It seems that the fact is that, more often than not, we simply *can't* change — even if it means that our bodies, our businesses or our churches are going to die.

So, if even a crisis like impending and imminent death can't force us to change, are we completely lost?
Are we doomed to ultimate failure?

Well, 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.

How do they do it?

The answer lies in understanding the nature of change itself.

Most of us see change as something that we have to do — an activity or a habit that must be altered.

My doctor told me I needed to lose weight to deal with a cholesterol problem — what did I do, I went out and bought diet books and began trying to change what I eat.

And I did well — I lost over 20 pounds.

But two summers later — I am right back where I started, and I can guess where my cholesterol numbers will be when I get it checked in the next couple of weeks.

We approach change issues 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, is engaging our right brain says John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor and expert on organizational change,.

“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 in ways that influence emotions, not just thought.”

Dr. Dean Ornish, has a rather unique approach in dealing with his patients who need to change. Rather than tell a heart patient to change or die — Ornish focuses on helping them tap into their emotions.

Death is too frightening to think about for most people. So denial and depression are the result, when we get that standard, change or die message. Because, who wants to live longer if they feel sick and depressed?

Dr. Ornish convinces 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 we need in order to make real change is the ability to “reframe” our thinking.

Many organizations operate with a military framework C with hierarchy, rules, policies and standard operating procedures. Like Ridge Church, for example.

The truth is that in that type of setting change happens rarely and, if at all, very slowly.

If we can learn to reframe the church as a family or community, where relationships are paramount, it helps us view the organization very differently.

But I understand that it still is not easy!

People become very attached to our point of references — our frames — which is why, for example, liberals and conservatives each think the other is nuts. They won’t hear anything that falls outside their understanding of how the world works.

The challenge is to offer a completely different frame of reference that goes beyond our typical thought patterns.

So how do we do this?

Howard Gardner, a cognitive scientist writes:

“When one is addressing a diverse or heterogeneous audience, the story must be simple, easy to identify with, emotionally resonant, and evocative of positive experience.”

What is amazing is that these change experts 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 using Gardner's words "emotionally resonant."

In Jeremiah 31, we read how God, through the prophet, 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 parted the Red Sea and brought them out of slavery in Egypt, the people began to fight the change and wanted to go back — the first committee they formed was the BACK TO EGYPT committee — because the known was far less uncomfortable than the unknown, even if it was 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 and started dancing 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 reference 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 31, 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, 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 another legal prescription or warn them of impending doom, God says:

"This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time

comes. I will put my law within them — write it on their hearts! — and be their God. And they will be my people.”

The program of change, says God through the prophet, won't be posted on the wall or carried around in a box to be thought about, 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 (31:34).

Today we celebrate five young people who really understand what this is all about. For the last 18 or 19 years they have been under the law of their parents — but now as they prepare to head off into the world — their parents must change that frame of reference or else lose them.

So instead of a frame of reference of the law — the new frame must be just like God shows us — one of relationship.

Jesus would also 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.

Jesus 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, he made change a life option ... even changing the threat of death itself to the promise of resurrection life.

Problem is that many individuals, churches and religious organizations are still working with their old frames. The constant debates in our churches about rules, religious practice, theology, polity 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.

It's time to embrace a new story, another covenant — the one God has been calling us toward all along. God wants us to *know* God, not just argue about what we know *about* God.

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 thinking to communication, from religion to a relationship with God.

Wonder how that would change things in our spirits, our selves and our church?