

"How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?" (Answer: *Change? What's change?*) So goes the joke, with the point being that change is a difficult thing. Changing your body and fitness level – many of us would agree what a good thing that could be, but definitely not easy. Making more time to grow our faith might require a change of daily habits and priorities – definitely a good thing again, but not so easy. The question is, does change always result in something good? Changing simply for the sake of novelty can certainly have more negative effects than positive, especially when people don't understand the need in for change. A 'new hymnal' for example can take years of getting used to. A modern version of a prayer or hymn you're used to can raise very strong opinions and reactions. Why is that?

I think that when you grow up with things being a certain way, you naturally develop a close connection to them. It can feel almost offensive to suggest that they be changed. "*You mean what I grew up with isn't good enough any more!*" And instead of looking at the potential or even probable benefits, people tend to see the change as unnecessary, inconvenient and even detrimental. Change can be very difficult.

I can't imagine how hard that must have been for those Jewish converts in Rome, who first read this letter. They grew up practicing their Jewish faith and traditions. They were taught the importance of keeping the laws of Moses in addition to the various ceremonial laws, and there were a lot! They learned that the Messiah would one day come to bring freedom from their oppressors and peace on earth to God's chosen people. And then to suggest that these things with which they grew up and held so dear were no longer necessary or valid, because Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled them all, there was definitely tension in the mix. You can imagine how well that news must have gone over with their Jewish family and friends!

Reading this letter to the Hebrews, you get a pretty clear indication that these Hebrew Christians were feeling pressure to go back to their former way of life and to give up their Christian faith. Given that Emperor Nero and the Roman government were singling out Christians as public enemies, and that Jewish family and friends seemed to be even less sympathetic, these converts were being forced to reconsider the value of following Christ and dealing with that constant pressure. Life would be less complicated if they would set aside their faith in Christ and go back to the way it used to be. If only they would just...change back.

The message came loud and clear: "*Don't change back. Following Christ is superior to the former way of life in every way. And when you need him most, Jesus will always be there for you.*"

But how can I know for a fact that Jesus will always be there for me? How many times have you felt all alone, like no one in the world could possibly understand what you're going through? And for someone to suggest that they 'know exactly how you feel' might make you feel even angrier. If you've ever said that to someone else, '*I know what you're going through,*' I'm sure you had no intention to be hurtful or demeaning. You just wanted to empathize with that person and to make them feel like they were understood. And that's because you yourself realized how important those connections are – to have someone who understands you and cares for you, too.

Talk about experiencing feelings of disconnect and alienation. For these Jewish Christians, just about every one of their former relationships (family, friends, employers, neighbors, etc.) could be described as 'former.' They were viewed as traitors, people who had turned against their own culture and the religion that once defined who they were. But the moment they publicly professed their faith and were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, all bets were off. As much as they wanted those people they loved to understand that they were not rejecting or abandoning them, that was exactly how their profession of faith was received. And it hurt.

'*What change could possibly be worth this kind of emotional trauma?* That was the very real question these believers needed an answer for. And so their correspondent gave them several. He wrote, "***14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.***" God's own Son knows what you go through. You are connected to God!

Unlike other human priests and high priests who approach the Holy of Holies to *symbolize* entering God's presence, Jesus has actually entered God's dwelling. He 'has gone through the heavens' where he rules in power as God's own Son. "***9 God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth...***" (Phil 2). Jesus is the almighty Son of God and ruler of heaven and earth. There is nothing he can't do for us.

Right. He *can* do anything, but why does it seem like he doesn't? Imagine what those Hebrew Christians felt under the weight of Nero's persecution. Church members were secretly disappearing, and they knew why. Do you think that what they wanted or hoped for? In times of pressure and stress, when things don't go according to expectations, believers can struggle to make heads or tails of what we see taking place. We tend to wonder, "*Why doesn't God do something to help us, if he's so powerful and loving?*"

He said he would be there for me, but maybe he just doesn't know how bad it's getting. How could a holy and perfect God actually feel and know what it's like to struggle the way I do? God must have bigger matters to deal with than my own little problems. He's ruling all things in heaven. Meanwhile I'm down here muddling through life.

When we go to God in the quiet, private recesses of our lives, we can pray that he come to us with his power and love to help us out. We may be used to praying that God's will be done, and yet it's so difficult to abandon our own will, to truly relinquish control over our lives. And when we observe that God has not acquiesced to our hopes and expectations, we're disappointed. And the longer we struggle to understand where God is leading us, we keep asking, '*Why? Why, Lord, are you letting me hurt so much? Why don't you give me what I need?*'

Maybe God watches from a distance where he sees our bad decisions, the way we can mess up our own lives, along with the tough breaks we seem to get no matter how hard we try. He's probably disappointed with us and pities us. And it can feel like he's nowhere near, like he's so far away. Does he even care any more?

And if you're not positive that your God truly understands and cares about you, then you won't see the need to approach him. And if he's too busy for you, then you can sure find other things to do with your time, too. Why bother to change your daily habits and make more time for his Word? It can seem like you're following a Savior who's there for you but only when it's convenient for him. And that's downright selfish.

Then maybe it is time for a change. But it's not the change that we would expect or choose, if it were up to us. That's because this change involves taking a clear look at ourselves through God's eyes. We might see people who work hard and struggle to follow him, but so often fail. We see people who ask for specific blessings from God and pray with great sincerity and confidence, but so often miss praying for the greatest blessing we need. Is it because we have underestimated our own failures and sins? This is a personal question for you to consider, but how often do you approach his throne of grace hungering and thirsting for his love, in desperate need of his forgiveness?

Every single day we need his love and forgiveness, and he will never ignore you or abandon you, even though far too often we have ignored and abandoned him. It's because of your failures and sins that God sent his own Son into this world, to become your perfect Substitute. Jesus became a man to set us free. By taking on human flesh, Jesus knew what it was like to live in this world. He suffered the spiritual torment of temptation by the devil and the world. He faced all these pressures and tests, and every single time he overcame. He was perfect in every way, so that when the Lamb of God laid down his life on the cross, shedding his blood and suffering the punishment of hell in our place, it counted for everyone. And there on Calvary, it was finished. Jesus accomplished the salvation that no other could.

That's why we can approach the holy throne of God and look into the face of our Father with complete confidence – Jesus has paid that price and made our peace with God. And now God wants you to see into the heart and mind of your Savior, to know how intimately he knows you – your hurts, your doubts and your struggles. He wants you to see the depth of your failures and offenses, so that you can see even more clearly his perfect sacrifice as your great High Priest. Through Jesus you have forgiveness and peace with God. Because of that fact, you can and will want to go to him with total confidence and openness, with whatever weighs on your heart, trusting in his complete forgiveness and love.

And because he fills your life so completely, you can see others through Jesus' eyes and point them to the source of your confidence and certain hope of our eternal home. What an awesome message we have to share! What a strength and peace we've been given! To know that Jesus our Savior is always there when we need him – this is the faith that we profess!

Hold onto that faith, and never let it go. Go to him in prayer with confidence, and do it often, because we need him often. Pray for that kind of change that shapes and forms our hearts and minds and lives to be more like Jesus', because this is the kind of change that is worth making. Relish the power and love that he gives you through his word and sacrament. This is God's personal assurance that he will always be there for you when you need him. Experience the change that brings glory and honor to our gracious God and Father, and to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.