

September 21, 2008
"Speaking of Change"
Dialogue Sermon with Diane Millick

Pastor Colson: This morning, Diane Millick and I are having a dialogue sermon. How this is going to work is that each of us will have some introductory remarks and then each of us will ask the other questions, and finally, each of us will have some brief concluding comments. We're going to do it from sitting here in the front.

I want to make three points in my opening introductory remarks. The first is that this scripture lesson that I just read, of Jesus in the temple is in itself a dialogue. It is this dialogue, this scripture that Diane and I want to keep as central to the things we're going to talk about this morning.

In the discussion that Jesus had with the Pharisees in the temple, one of the arguments that Jesus used are familiar words:

Jesus said, "If you keep my word, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free. If you keep my word, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." There's an adversarial tone going on between Jesus and the Pharisees. Diane and I don't feel the need to convey that adversarial quality, but we do think it is important that we consider what it means to be seeking after the truth. If that is our experience and we seek after truth and we're hot on the trail of truth, then the change that comes to us will be very great. And it will be a change that brings freedom to us. In fact, to be free is equivalent to growing spiritually.

My second point to consider is that today. We begin, as I mentioned to the children, a series called Roads to Mission. It overlaps the theme that I've been pursuing these last several weeks about the church, but in reality, Roads to Mission grows very naturally out of everything that I've said over the last several weeks about the church. It is because the church has mission. Or as we are learning to say, the church is missional. The church has mission because Jesus gave the church a mission. We are missional because everything that we are to do in this congregation is to be circling around seeking the truth.

I should also point out that when this series was planned some months ago; it was to be a focus on Christians in the Middle East. But, this Roads to Mission theme keeps that idea in focus nonetheless, at least because next week my dialogue partner will be Louis Yako, a Christian native of Iraq. And on world Communion Sunday, Mark Southard will be the preacher. He's spent many months in Pakistan. But let me be clear. If we are going to seek the truth, and that's our purpose in following Jesus, then we inevitably find ourselves on roads to mission. Make no mistake; it isn't the church if we aren't in mission. So, today, and for the next three weeks, we are presenting in a variety of ways, some of these roads of mission.

Now, number three. Even if it is not apparent, the church always faces change. Sometimes, all that is required is that we name the change; that we name drama in worship; that we name dialogue sermon; that we name insights from the scripture that we had no idea were there; that we name that there is choice for Roads to Mission that we need to take or are involved in. Change includes installing new elders. Change includes commissioning other leaders as well. We can't really divorce ourselves from the ongoing part of change. But when Jesus tells us that the truth will make us free, he is saying that if truth is clearly the center of what you want to do about your faith in Jesus Christ, then no amount of change is going to be squashed, the truth. Prepare yourself for the truth. Prepare for the change. In fact, the more change there is, is just one way of revealing how the truth is durable and how it is at the inner core of what is important to church. That's what we are, the church looking for the truth, wherever it is.

Diane Millick: At the joint deacon and elder meeting, when Sue Vitale read us your resignation letter, I had two comments in response to it. The first was a selfish one, regarding confirmation and Grady. Because this was going to be his year for confirmation class.

My second response was that I felt this was a perfect time for our church to go through this transition. I thought this because of all the work the Faith on the Road team has done. We have looked at our past. We have looked at our present. We have surveyed various members of our congregation. We are looking into the future with our Vision Team and Vision Retreat. We have gathered many, many responses from our conversation starters and we're still gathering them. The Vision Team is taking all of this information, along with utilizing a Bible study and prayer, and putting on paper our new vision statement. All this work puts us ahead in seeking a new pastor for this congregation. All of what has happened has evoked the fear of the unknown and the fear of change.

Many years ago, seven, eight or more, you asked me if I'd like to be a deacon and I very quickly declined because it was something new and different. A few years later you asked me again, and I said yes, taking on that fear of the unknown. Taking on my own path to mission, being a deacon has truly solidified my faith in God, both inwardly and outwardly. I pray more often. I rely on God for answers and strength, almost always. I use my need to help others through being a deacon. Once you announced your retirement, I started asking questions. What happens? And many of you have asked these questions, too. What is the process? I have never been through this before as an adult. I sought out to find those answers and didn't just let them lie in the parking lot at the end of my conversation. I found out it may be up to two years to find a replacement. I found out that we will hire an interim pastor during this process. I found out that some congregation members may choose not to worship here during this transition. I found out that members who have left may come back. The truth...all of this results in change...the fear of the unknown.

After you announced your retirement, I went to Dodie Perrin and asked to be a Worship Assistant. I'd never been Worship Assistant before and I wanted to do that with you before you left. I also approached you to see if we could do a sermon together on change. I have to let everyone in on a secret. I am totally frightened up here. (laughter) I get nervous in front of my peers, but I'm not nervous in front of people I don't know. I was talking with Dan Hemberger as we were driving back from visiting a church in New Jersey when they had their Workcamp Sunday. I was telling Dan about this and he said, "Diane, you're in front all the time. You do so many things. But I'm never alone. I'm always with someone. Standing up there in the pulpit by myself, I'm very fearful. I keep taking deep, cleansing thoughts, asking God to help me not mispronounce a word. I confronted that fear, the fear of doing something different. Luckily the Bible passages today did not have any awkward words.

Pastor Colson: I wonder, Diane, if you would be willing to say something about what occurred in your life between the time you said you couldn't be a deacon, and then at a point later you said you agreed to be a deacon. And you've been a deacon not for some years. Can you say something about what happened to you in between?

Diane Millick: I got to know people of this congregation. I became more of an interactive member at this church. I started working with Jim on Youth Group and started working with children here. I thought to myself, I did want to be a deacon. I care about this congregation and I wanted to give back. It was one of my missions.

Pastor Colson: When you began your remarks, you mentioned all the things that have been happening in the Faith on the Road and the Vision Team and I wonder if you'd say something in terms of your experience with that group. What are you thinking will happen with FOR in the next number of months? What do you hope for?

Diane Millick: I hope that God gives us a clear vision of where this congregation would like to be and where we'd like to be at. I don't know how that's going to happen. I don't know when that is going to happen. Being part of FOR, I had no idea, each thing that we did, I had no idea what the outcomes were going to be and what was going to come next as a facilitator on FOR. We don't know what's going to happen. We don't know what vision is going to come from the Vision Team. We don't know what's going to come out of our Vision Retreat. We have to have the faith in God to guide us, and to let us know what direction this congregation is going to go.

Pastor Colson: Your turn.

Diane Millick: You are going into many changes in your own personal life. How long did it take you to decide, "It's time for me to retire?" What was your thought process?

Pastor Colson: Well, I think, not the least of which, is that I turned 65. But, there comes a time too, when the balance between what you think you have accomplished and what you think you were able to do to inspire people in the church, you feel that has been accomplished, that's been done. I remember saying when I first came, I would stay as long as I was still having fun. I think that's equivalent to being able to inspire other people. So I think I began thinking a year ago, or maybe a little longer, that it was time for me to find something else to do, that I had done as much as I thought I could.

Diane Millick: In your talking with congregation members and going to their homes you've been, unfortunately, unable to go to everybody. You have found one theme that many people have talked about, and you shared with us at our Deacon meeting. It has to do with Workcamp. Why don't you tell everybody about that?

Pastor Colson: Well, I've been to almost 80 homes, and I was amazed at the number of people who have brought up on their own, unsolicited, how we have changed as a congregation over the time I've been here as pastor, some 17 years. And the signs of the change from a congregation that was largely in a survival mode (just keep us going from one month to the next) to a congregation that was looking for mission opportunities and eager to get involved in them. This seemed to characterize the change over this period of time. Even people who have been here longer than I have been, and even people who were here a shorter time, both kinds of people would say this. There were programs that they would then highlight. One of them was Workcamp which we have had for 17 years. The Workcamp was something that originally we thought we would just do for the youth for one year. Then if it was successful, do it another year. Nobody thought at the time that it would have a transforming effect on the congregation; that it would help to have us think of the world as larger than just Emmaus. Of course, other things that we've done: Daybreak, our relationship with Kenya, seem to amplify how we have changed in that respect.

Diane: I'm going to start with my conclusion.

If you think about some of the changes that have happened already at Faith, none of these things were put on the list and said, this has to change. It just evolved. Nametags for ushers, the wireless microphone, the new information board, the way several committee meetings are run now, seeking God's guidance first, and then approaching the tasks at hand. I feel, as a member of this congregation, we have a new twist in the road. We will be going up and down hills, around curves, and take some roads this congregation has not been on in 17 years. We are going to be taking risks, going up and down and around those

curves. We may have to pull off to the side of the road and see what God has in store for us. Some members are driving straight ahead with God's guidance, seeking His truth and what he has in store for us. We have to continue to put our trust in God and he will lead us in the direction so this congregation will be even stronger and more faithful as we seek His truth.

Pastor Colson: Since you mentioned the aspect of my visits to many families in the last 3 months, one of the other stories that people told was how accessible our membership is one to another. Some of the words used to talk about it have been more than we're a friendly congregation. But I've tried to push people to say more. What does that really mean? I think it's hard. It means we're accessible. It means that people are easy to talk to and that we have a certain permission, a certain freedom to bounce ideas off one another.

And so the thing that is a fascination to me as we talk about Roads to Mission, as we talk about change, as we talk about truth, that there is yet a pool of change that resides in the courage that our members have to encounter one another. There are incredible resources in this congregation, but they reside in our members. It isn't in our budget. It isn't in the programs. It resides in our members. It's exciting to find out the faith that the people have. It is then potential for the future that as each of you seeks to engage in that storytelling conversation, that truth will come through. Yes! The light of that truth, you'll know it even more.

Let us pray.

O Lord, we are grateful for all of your words that get spoken and listened and received. Because in the words we encounter the Word, even Jesus Christ, Your Son and our Lord. Amen.