

Pentecost Sunday May 23, 2021.
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A Big Change
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Those who know me well know I am a fan of the long running BBC television show *Doctor Who*. But I hadn't thought about it for a very long time when I was asked if I had watched any of the rebooted series. The person who asked me was on staff at the second parish where I served as rector. I replied I hadn't watched because I remembered *Doctor Who* fondly from my childhood and thought of it as a children's show I had grown out of. We all change, we all grow up, and some of the things we love don't change or grow with us. That is the way of life, and it's okay.

My staff person suggested I give the rebooted series a try because I reminded him of one of the new characters: the brilliant, bold, and mysterious River Song. Since I didn't know who he was talking about, I wasn't sure if I was being complimented or insulted, so I tuned in and was delighted to find myself back in the company of The Doctor, who is still traveling through space and time.

I noticed how the show and The Doctor had changed since my childhood. Not only was the character portrayed by a different actor, he had been through adventures, losses, and close calls I had not witnessed, but could see how they had affected The Doctor. Despite the changes, it was still very much the same Doctor I met as a child. It was so compelling for me to see a character experience growth and maturation like a real person it brought me back to the show. Because the change meant there was room for a wider, more diverse audience. I had been wrong. I hadn't outgrown *Doctor Who*. The show had grown and changed so that I hadn't left it behind, nor was I left out. (By the way, I also learned it is far from an insult to remind a *Doctor Who* fan of River Song.)

This embrace of change and how change contributes to our growth, maturation and inclusion has become a prominent theme in *Doctor Who*. One way the show writers explore change is when *The Doctor* goes through the regeneration process. Regeneration is a science fiction trope and peculiar trait of Time Lords like The Doctor that allows them another life when theirs comes to an end. This not only allows the show to go on and on because the actor who portrays The Doctor can be replaced, it gives the character the opportunity to reflect on the life he lived, what he regrets, what gives him joy, who he loved, who loved him, who he helped, who he hurt, who hurt him, what he learned. The last two times The Doctor regenerated, he gave insightful speeches that served to honor the actor who portrayed the character and to help us fans accept and transition through the change to the new Doctor.

One speech was all about change. "We all change," said the Eleventh Doctor, "and that's okay, that's good. You gotta keep moving, as long as you remember all the people you used to be." When the Twelfth Doctor regenerated, in his speech he reminded himself what he had learned in the hopes of carrying that wisdom into his next regeneration, "Remember hate is always foolish and love is always wise. Try to be nice, but never fail to be kind."

These insights have stayed with fans of the show and have helped some of us navigate the changes in our lives and inspire hope for positive growth through change, even though the words also signaled the end of one version of The Doctor and the beginning of another Doctor, both of whom are The Doctor.

This is the same kind of change the followers of Jesus lived through after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Usually preachers and commentators describe or interpret these events through the lens of Jesus, highlighting his uniqueness. And that is good. It's important to focus on Christ, because it is his story those of who us follow him are called to tell and his message of repentance and forgiveness Jesus asks his followers to share with the world. But today it might help us to step back and look at those first followers of Jesus, as they might have something as vital as *Doctor Who* to tell us about change. Especially today. Today we celebrate and remember one of the biggest changes for the disciples - the day the disciples became the Church.

Today the Church celebrates Pentecost. It is sometimes called the birthday of the Church. But too often I fear that is interpreted to mean the birth of the institution the Church has become as a result of the many changes over its two thousand years of existence. Today we get to remember all people the church has been, to borrow from The Doctor, and it goes much deeper than institutionalism.

The big change began in a room where the disciples were waiting together. After Jesus was raised from the dead, he appeared to his disciples and through those appearances seemed to have renewed the call to follow him after his resurrection. Because following the Risen Jesus was going to be different - was going to be a change- from following the Incarnate Jesus. Instead of following Jesus from town to town watching him heal people or listening to him preach or tell parables and fighting over who among them was the most important disciple, they were going to have go without Jesus to places they had never been. And to whomever they met tell the story of Jesus who lived, died, was raised, ascended and is coming again. That's a big change for the disciples. Perhaps a scary sounding change. Maybe hard to imagine how to do kind of change. That's why Jesus gave them time to prepare for and adjust to the change by appearing to them before ascending into heaven and why he told them to wait together after his ascension.

That's where the reading from today's Gospel comes into this Pentecost Sunday. In John's Gospel Jesus promised his followers some help by sending the Advocate or Holy Spirit. This helper will be a form of encouragement and empowerment for the disciples. I like how Paul describes the Holy Spirit in his letter to Jesus' followers in Rome as "the Spirit helps us in our weakness." I interpret that to mean when we are faced with a challenge or change we suspect is too much for us, or we can't figure out how to do it, the Spirit finds a way to our hearts to help us try and maybe find ourselves doing what we never thought we could.

That is what happened to the disciples in the New Testament Book of Acts of the Apostles, which we always read on Pentecost. The disciples were all together in a room waiting, just like Jesus had instructed them, when the Holy Spirit showed up and the change started. It's described as a rushing wind, and shimmering slivers of light like tongues of fire filled the room and settled on each and every person. Suddenly everyone could speak a language different from their native tongue, and they knew what they had to do. They knew how to change. They left the room and went into the city where people from regions with very hard to pronounce names were showing up. The disciples started speaking all these languages at once. Some people heard one of the disciples tell them the story of Jesus in the language they knew best. Others heard a disturbing cacophony and made assumptions about the disciples, perhaps in an attempt to dismiss them. That is a risk that comes with any new change - it won't be understood and therefore will be viewed as a threat or dismissed as bad behavior. But hearing criticism, Peter, one of Jesus' followers, stood up and spoke clarification, stating they weren't drunk, but the fulfillment of an old prophecy that in God's Kingdom is near because all of them had been inspired and made able to speak of God's love so to people of all places.

The part of this story I marvel at is that none of the disciples were left behind, neither by choice nor design. There is no critical cynic sneering about the experience; no resentment about who got what language. We don't hear about the person who couldn't run as fast or speak as loud as the others, or wasn't dressed right, and had to stay behind while everyone else went out into the streets. One of the characteristics of God's Kingdom I like best is there is room for everyone, and room for everyone to make room.

Most years preachers might interpret this story as a call for the Church to remember we were born out of fire and wind meant to go boldly into the world showing the world the love of God. That's still a good sermon. It has it's time and its place. It's good to remember how it all started, with a change.

But perhaps this year the Spirit might be calling us to look at the people who went through so much change to become the church and for the church to remember all the changes it has gone through. To forming small groups in cities that slowly spread around the world. To enduring and surviving violent persecutions. To establishing leadership and ensuring the story of Jesus would be told by new generations of disciples. To fighting over core beliefs and developing doctrine and liturgies. To aligning with governments, kingdoms, and spreading through colonization and mission and violent conflict. To supporting and benefiting from slavery, feudalism, sexism, and misogyny. To renaming, dividing, separating. To listening, repenting, participating in abolition and playing a role in ending child labor. To reconsidering leadership and making room for people of all color, races, genders, ages, ability and status as members and leaders. To erecting huge buildings, writing our own music, making religious art.

The church is far from perfect, it still has a lot to learn, and it has been through many changes - some of them Holy Spirit driven - to arrive in this current moment in time. A time when we may be called once again into change. After a little over a year of a pandemic, we are again shifting, changing, to return to in person activities. Like the church before us, this is a time to learn and apply what we've learned to make room for everyone. How do we as a church return to in person worship in ways that welcome all, especially those who found online connection meaningful who may have felt left out before the pandemic but found connection during it? Before the pandemic welcoming all meant including people from all walks of life. Today it still does only now that has been expanded to include people who are and are not vaccinated with the COVID-19 vaccine. The immune compromised and those who are grieving the loss of loved ones. It also includes those who are excited to return and to ready be done with precautions. Once again we will be asked to make room for each other.

Today's Spirit filled story of Pentecost reminds us times of change are not about going backward to what was. They are about growing and maturing so that we can keep making room for everyone seeking inclusion. We have all changed since we last met in person in November of last year. And we will be bringing those changes with us as we go out into in person parish life and work and school and social activities. People aren't the only ones who changed. During the pandemic Church of the Good Shepherd has changed. And those changes will be noticed as we return to in person worship. Like The Doctor said, "We all change, and that's okay. That's good. You've got to keep moving. As long as you remember all the people you used to be." This change is like all the other moments of change in the past. That's why it's important to remember, not so we try in vain to return to what was but remember what we learned and listen for the Holy Spirit to help us apply what we've learned so no one is left behind, so that we make room for everyone, and continue to be welcoming of all people. Perhaps, like the TV show that changed and matured to be more welcoming of people of all ages and places, we can grow to be welcoming of even more diversity and share Jesus' story and message of healing, repentance, and forgiveness with even more people, like the disciples on Pentecost, where the Church originally came from.

We can start by remembering what The Doctor also said before a big change, something The Doctor thought was essential for his next life; "Remember, hate is always foolish, and love is always wise. Always try to be nice, but never fail to be kind."