

“How My Mind Has Changed”
The Rev. Frank Seaman
(Matthew 13:10-17)
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When I was asked to speak on the subject of “How My Mind Has Changed” I should have asked “since when?” How has it changed in the last 50 years since the time I was a philosophy major in college? Or in the last 20 years after I had been a parish pastor for 25 years? Or perhaps I should have asked if they meant either the last 7 years since my retirement from Northwood; or just this past week. In one way or another, my mind is always changing! And the difficulty for me was to pick and choose which way I want to go with this. You see, it’s not only my mind that has changed, everything around me and almost everything about me has changed - even my hair!!!

But assuming that those who planned this topic were thinking about theology and the church, I have selected just one of several areas where I have experienced significant changes in the way that I think. That is the area of **faith and reason**.

I grew up in East Texas where everything was black and white - good and bad - right and wrong!!! If the Bible said it, I believed it word for word (as I understood it, of course). I took the Bible literally rather than seriously!!! I was often judgmental toward those who didn’t act, think and believe like I did. I knew everything! It was that time in life when the less I knew, the more I knew. Now, the more I know, the less I know.

However, in college and seminary I began to learn about the Documentary Hypothesis, and the differences between the synoptic gospels and the gospel of John. I read theologians such as Karl Barth, Frederich Schliermacher, Rudolph Bultmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich - giants of the faith. It began to dawn on me that these dedicated persons might know more than I did. Even when I didn’t agree with them I couldn’t just write them off. Almost unknowingly, my closed mind was being opened up to a new world - not all at once, but gradually. They made me think and question many of my life long convictions. It was a stressful time for me because being in school, I hardly had time to think about anything other than preparing for the next class or the next exam.

So it was during my early years as a pastor that I began to have serious doubts about my faith, about God, and about my vocation as a pastor. Most people seem to go through such periods of doubt and disbelief during their high school and college years. I was a late bloomer in that respect.

Being surrounded by people, many of whom knew the Bible much better than I - many of them had had a Christian experience that was direct and rather dramatic - one which they could identify as to place and date. I had never had one of those “born again” experiences. In fact, the whole idea of such an experience in which God confronted me in a spectacular way was not something I either expected or wanted. Not that I never had any “mountaintop experiences,”

but they did not cause me to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. They were the result of my faith, not the cause of it.

I can't remember a time when I was not in some kind of relationship with God. Admittedly, it has not always been a good relationship, but the relationship has been there in some fashion or the other. It is out of that relationship that those "mountaintop" experiences became meaningful to me. Through them my understanding of God as Creator and Redeemer - a God of mercy, love and compassion - has been developed and is continuing to develop over the years.

Today I can say that I have come to know God in Jesus Christ through both **faith and reason**.

I accept those whose Christian experience is more emotional or "spiritual" than mine, but I have learned that I don't need to be ashamed if my experience is different from theirs. I don't have the need to explain why my faith is grounded in thinking and accepting rather than any particular experience.

I understand my life to be based on both **faith and reason**. I don't know how you can have one without the other!! It was through my study of the Bible, my experiences in the church, and my education that I have come to believe in the God I know in Jesus Christ. That is not to say that my faith is void of feeling and emotions. But that is not what it is based on. Rather it comes from my reflection on how God has been at work in my life from the very beginning.

The Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, once wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forward." As I look backward over my life I can see numerous places where God has been working with me - not in dramatic ways - oftentimes I was not even aware of his presence - but through everyday experiences, conversation, reading God's word in the scriptures, and participating in and with the community of faith we know as the church.

It has been through study, thought and reflection that I have come to recognize that God is a person and therefore has a unique personal relationship with each and every individual. I don't expect anyone else to have the same experience or relationship with God that I have. If my relationship with God requires me to set aside at least 30 minutes every morning and every evening for prayer and meditation, everyone else doesn't have to do the same in order to be a Christian. Or if my relationship with God requires me to avoid eating meat on Friday or to fast at least once a week, it does not mean that those who don't are not as Christian or as devoted as I am. [I don't do any of those things, by the way.]

Remember Jesus' words to his disciples - those who had lived with him for several years? They wanted to know why he spoke to the people in parables. *"The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."*

Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century, described theology as "faith seeking understanding." The Christian faith dares to ask questions and struggles to find answers.

It is constantly calling into question general assumptions about God, the world and ourselves. It does not fear the truth, even when we don't like to hear it. Neither does it claim to have all the answers or to have the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The Christian faith is an adventure - a journey - or as you see at the top of your bulletin each Sunday: "faith is considered a process, not an arrival."

Today, I am much more tolerant of those who don't agree with me. There are times when that takes more tolerance than others. I still have to remind myself that every person - every individual is a child of God - just like me. And regardless of who they are or what situation they are in, it is my responsibility to respond to them with love and acceptance.

And you know - my life is a whole lot easier than it used to be. Now I can let God judge and govern this world. I don't have to be in charge of anyone except me. And that's a full time job!!!