

# Doing A New Thing

Sermon given by the Rev. Marge Palmer  
at the meeting of the Presbytery of San Jose  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, February 2, 2008

Scripture: Isaiah 42: 5 - 9  
2 Corinthians 5: 17 - 21

Television commercials today are a mixed bag. Some, I think, are very creative. Others, I wonder why any company would pay for such inane drivel. A commercial that I think has something going for it is by Chevron Oil Company. I expect you have all seen it: it's a short commentary on the environment, some beautiful pictures and a statement on Chevron's efforts to counter global warming. What I really like about the commercial is the last line, "Imagine that, an oil company as part of the solution". "Imagine that!"

To imagine is to form a new idea or notion, to conceive in the mind, to create by the imagination. In modern parlance, one might say, "it is thinking outside the box". Imagination is a catalyst to bring about new things, new happenings. With that in mind, try this; "Imagine the Church doing a new thing!" The Church with a capital C.

Throughout the centuries the Church has been known to do "a new thing", or two or many. The Reformation was certainly a new thing! Martin Luther was convinced that the Church needed reform. His intention was that the reforms that he envisioned, or perhaps imagined, would take place within the Church. It didn't happen that way and the Protestant Church was born. The Church doing a new thing.

Vatican 2 was the Church doing a new thing. Pope John the 23rd saw the need for reform within the Roman Catholic Church and many changes were brought about during that time. One of the major changes was that Latin was no longer required in saying the "Mass". What a revelation, at least for me. I didn't know, and this shows my parochialism or my naiveté. I didn't know that the mysterious mass, was actually Holy Communion; that the same words are used in the Catholic Mass that we use in the Lord's Supper!

What a breath of fresh air. Catholics began to sing hymns, like we do. Guitars were used and the service became more relaxed. People began to read and understand the Bible more. But what was most important for us Protestants was the ecumenism that resulted. It was an exciting time as Protestants of various denominations met with Catholics in the neighbor-

hood, often people who knew each other, but had never met to discuss their faith.

We shared meals, worshipped together, made plans for ecumenical meetings, for programs, Bible study, theological discussions, ideas on how we could work together to minister to the folks in our city. This went on for a few years. Then Pope John the 23rd died earlier than expected and gradually the steam went out of our meetings, as people moved away, some died and there was not the encouragement from the Vatican that there had been. We learned a lot, not only about the Catholic faith, but also about ourselves and our own understanding of who we are in this complex world of ours. There have been residual effects that have continued in the Church and in the lives of so many of us who were involved in those heady days of ecumenism. The Church doing a new thing.

For the Church to do a new thing can be difficult because so many of us resist change. Take for example Hymn books! Now there's an emotional subject! When the "new" Presbyterian Hymnal was issued, one of the churches where I was pastor dragged its heels for some time before the Session finally voted to buy it. But there was a condition. They would purchase the new hymnal if they could keep the old red hymnbook and every Sunday at least one hymn would be sung from that. Now, that was a lot of fun for me, choosing hymns from two hymnbooks every Sunday. But the church was doing a new thing.

Whether to use a hymnbook or project hymns on a screen, whether to use an organ or praise band, whether to read from the pulpit Peterson's Message or the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible are issues for each Congregation to decide. Such decisions are important to each individual church and reflect a change or a new way of doing worship or ministry. But almost every denomination, including Roman Catholic, is beset by issues or problems that need to be addressed that may require the denomination to move in a different direction or do a new thing.

I will mention one problem and speak specifically about the Presbyterian Church, although it affects others. Don't look so worried; it isn't what you think it is! The problem with which we have been confronted for many years is our declining membership. For decades we have been wringing our hands over this situation and we have not known what to do about it. Seminars have been held across the church to deal with it, books written, magazine articles abound on the subject, Sessions discuss it far into the night, the best minds in the church debate it, but we continue to lose members. What can we do about this urgent problem? Maybe this is where the Church needs to do a new thing. And perhaps to do a new thing, we need first to do an old thing.

The question that needs to be asked is, why? Why are so few people involved in the church today? If we go back a few decades to the 1950's, the Church was burgeoning. It seemed like everyone went to church. Building programs could be seen in every community where Education wings were added, offices were expanded, the Sanctuaries were refurbished, and new church development was at an all time high. To attend church was the thing to do.

What happened? The change came about in the 1960's with the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War when people, especially the young, began to challenge the status quo, the establishment, the traditional ways that things had always been done. There was a huge cultural shift and, for the most part, the Church stood still. We, and I'm talking about the Church in general, not individual churches that saw the problem, but we as a denomination, lost our prophetic voice and continued to be part of the establishment, the very establishment the young people were rebelling against.

When membership began to decline at a rapid rate, we at last saw that we needed to do something and thought the thing to do was to be like the new "culture". If you can't beat them, join them. New Sunday school curriculums were published. Our daughter was a freshman in high school and her Sunday school class used a book called "Values Clarification". Not a Biblical passage in it. It could have been a class taught in school or Girl Scouts or the Y. And we wonder why Biblical illiteracy is so prevalent. Adult classes and lectures were offered that people could hear or join in any secular organization. And so people wandered away from the church and few others were attracted. I repeat that this was not happening in every congregation, maybe not in yours, but to cater to society seemed to be a part of our denomination's effort to stop the loss of members.

So, as our membership in 2008 continues to drop what is the "old" thing that we need to do? Well, just look around your neighborhood, your city or town, your county, the State, Silicon Valley. What do you see? There are thousands of people who are desperate, who are searching for meaning in their lives. People who are hungry, both physically and spiritually; people who are anxious about the economy; people who fear terrorism; others who are exhausted from working two or more jobs and some who are depressed because they have no job; people who are homeless or destitute.

What can we as Presbyterians, as Christians offer them? How can we minister to them? Not by giving them what they hear every day but by presenting them with hope, by providing a community or fellowship

where they can hear a radically new message that they are loved by God through the grace of Jesus Christ, that they are somebody, that they are worthy no matter their station in life or their present condition, that there are people who care about them and will help them through their struggles, their lives can change: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!

To take the message of God's love out into the community is doing an old thing. Doing a new thing is to do it together and that is why I have brought this up today. The challenge, I think, is so huge that very few churches can do it alone. There are 41 churches in our Presbytery and three in New Church Development. There are eight churches in San Jose, there are four in Salinas, three in Santa Cruz, three in Saratoga, two in Palo Alto, two in Sunnyvale, two in Watsonville, and among those communities where there is just one church, they are in many cases just "spitting distance" from another Presbyterian church.

And so, as I step down as Moderator of this Presbytery I challenge you to get together with one another, pastors and elders, to think and pray and imagine ways in which you can take God's Word into your community where hurting people await you. Set aside your differences. That would be a new thing! What divides us is not as important as what unites us. If there were to be some calamity in our area, a huge earthquake, a terrorist attack, we would come together in a flash. Well, the Church is in a precarious position and if membership continues to decline, the Church could be in a desperate situation. So, let's get together, let's do a new thing in the Church.

I suggest that you not spend your time and energy on gimmicky ways to bring people into the church. If you are faithful to the Gospel, church membership will take care of itself. It is taking a simple message to a complex society. It is not easy, but it is doable. Let's get busy and do it!