

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 28, 2018
The Rev. Dr. David Thompson
Luther and adapting to disruptive change

Isaiah 43: 19

“See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” “For, I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future!

A rather ignorant and rude young man called John, had a bad habit of starting conversations with senior citizens and usually ending the conversation, by putting down the senior citizen. This annoyed his fellow students. One day, John was with his fellow students on the subway and on the seat next to him was a senior citizen with thick white hair. John looked at him and then said "Excuse me for pointing this out, but I find it impossible for my generation to understand yours." "So what seems to be the problem?" asked the senior. "Well," replied John in a voice loud enough so that everyone nearby in the subway car could hear, "your generation obviously grew up in a totally different world to the one we live in today. Today we live in a world of computers, the internet, smart phones, wind farms, nuclear power, 200mph racing cars, satellite television, 3D films, superfast passenger planes, space travel, hybrid cars, and medicines to cure almost any disease. Your generation is simply out of touch with what's going on." At this point, the senior replied, "You're absolutely right, my boy. When I was younger, we certainly didn't have all those things you've just mentioned. So, guess what we did? We invented them!! So please tell me, just what are **you** doing for the next generation?" There was a silence and then a spontaneous sudden clapping. It was the fellow students who were then joined by everyone on the subway car.

Have you noticed that Donald Trump has a strangle hold on the media by using Twitter? Have you also noticed that he has managed to make himself the topic of conversation around the world? Why is that?

I was listening to one of the authors of The Age of Discovery, Chris Kutarna. He was on CBC radio and he thought that he had the answer to that. He said that there was a time when there were no printing presses in the West and the communication was largely oral. In those days **people were considered to be important because they said things that were worth listening to and that made them important.** Anything that did not make sense was dropped quickly or simply ignored in the old oral system. If you talked nonsense you could not become an important person. You would be ignored and no one would pay attention. **Your importance came from what you said that was wise or memorable.** But in today's world we have reversed that. **We believe that if someone is important then we must pay attention to whatever he or she says. If it is printed we seem to have lost the ability to ignore it.** The evolution from oral communication to print media has made the printed word more powerful than the spoken.

Today anyone, including Donald Trump, can press a button and be published instantly. And we have not yet evolved enough in our uses of print media, to ignore stuff that doesn't make sense. Thus Trump's strangle hold on world attention when he tweets. Doesn't matter what he says, whether it is lies, personal insults, denials, lighting changes in policy or simplifications, the media reads his Twitter feed as if it were actually important, when according to Chris Kutarna it could simply be ignored. In other words the media has not accommodated the change and neither has the world. Hence the stranglehold.

We are here in New St. James today for one major reason: Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. He was very surprised at what happened. He wrote to a friend at the time and said: "I did not wish to have the theses widely circulated. I only intended submitting them to a few learned men for examination...But now they are being spread abroad and translated everywhere, which I never could have credited, so that I regret having given birth to them." What had happened? Luther was at the edge of a huge change. From oral communication to that of the printing press and publishing of written communication. But Luther was a brilliant opportunist and he accommodated the change quickly. and then surfed the waves of change. He was a prolific writer, and was quick to take advantage of a huge opportunity. In fact 1/5th of all pamphlets published in Germany between 1500 and 1530 bore his name, and according to Kutarna and his coauthor Ian Goldin, they "served to spread his ideas to other opinion leaders quickly, keep them all in touch with each other's evolving thoughts and experiences and broadcast a coordinated program more quickly to a wider audience, than had ever been possible before. That is one major reason why you and I are here this morning. Luther surfed the change and the result? The Presbyterian Church in Canada and New St. James.

Does what Luther did sound familiar? We are witnessing something very similar with social media today. It is very like the first renaissance that introduced so much change to the world, a lot of it disruptive. The social media and the acceleration of change in so many areas have created a change tsunami.

John Kotter is perhaps the leading Guru in the world when it comes to managing change. A Harvard business prof., he argues that widespread and difficult change is no longer the exception. It is, in fact the rule.

When organizations begin, they are fast, lithe and agile and entrepreneurial in focus. But over time they develop a hierarchy of management; they develop processes and procedures that run the business and the organization becomes much less adaptable, and can get itself so far into the mire that it cannot change and has to die. Think Sears and declining churches... But the good news according to Kotter is that older organizations can change!

Last week I said that I would deal with what New St. James could do to accommodate the speed of change that has made older ways of doing things obsolete. According to Kotter, organizations that are going to be able to survive and thrive in the tsunami of change that the world is confronting, need to **develop a dual operating system**. One system keeps the lights on and the other manages change by seizing a major opportunity that is present in every change. When

the opportunity is researched by the second operating system and it is sure that it will benefit the organization, the second system presents it to the 'keeping the lights on side' for implementation. Done well, it can turn the organization away from a slow decline, into new life, and the organization can begin to thrive again. Fortunately, this is not a novel idea. Not only does every successful organization go through this process in its beginning. It is also possible to recreate that lithe, flexible and fast acting entrepreneurial side that can accommodate change, the same system that it once had.

The early church to solve a major challenge, devised a **dual operating system**. The twelve apostles, which were in our parlance, a Guiding Coalition, for the early church, the 12 had a brilliant idea. Simply put, the apostles suggested that there be a separation of duties: the apostles would preach and a new creation called Deacons, would look after the Hebrew and Greek widows and orphan needs, in the distribution of food, and on the waiting on tables. The whole community bought into it, it was implemented, and the church prospered and grew two operating systems still used in many churches today. Elders and deacons.

It might surprise you know that New St. James is currently using a **dual operating system**. It goes like this: I am charged with keeping the lights on and preparing the congregation for a new minister.

Dr. Andrew Fullerton is tasked with looking after the search team and its processes, so that New St. James can choose another minister for the future. Both operating systems are well integrated into each other by people operating in key positions in both systems.

But the search team is **separate** and its processes necessarily confidential, until the end of the process when a candidate is announced to the congregation. **They are tasked with discerning God's will for**

New St. James. They will manage a big change in New St. James and when they have done their homework which consists of prayer, discernment, research etc. they will recommend that change to 'the keep the lights on side.'

So what Kotter is suggesting is not new at all really. **But what's new is this:** the change that is coming at us is coming **so** fast, that we need to have two operating systems going **all the time**. In order to do that we would create what Kotter calls a Guiding coalition of congregational leaders with vision, who would be tasked with assessing the changes that are coming to churches and seeing which ones, if implemented, would benefit New St. James the most. They do the research and the homework and then they present to the 'lights on side' a fully researched proposal for implementation.

In today's world it is important to experiment, to try things out and to not be afraid of failure. For we often learn the most from failure. But having failed we don't get discouraged, we simply try something else that might work. There are churches that are thriving in the midst of this massive change that we are all experiencing. Some of them may be young and still have that lithe, flexible entrepreneurial side. But if these churches shut down that lithe side, with which they began they too will decline. So, what is the trick to thriving no matter what organization you serve in?

Develop a guiding coalition as part of a dual operating system that is tasked with managing change in the organization.

When Kotter first published his book called Leading Change he had no idea how relevant his research into change would become. But the book took off and became legendary with its 8 stage process. His latest book called Accelerate, teaches how to find in the change that is coming, that wave of opportunity, and how to surf it. For Luther it was print, and translating a printed Bible into the vernacular. He seized the opportunities and rode that wave of print throughout his life. It was stronger than the Catholic church and so Protestantism took off. Luther could not be stopped thanks to the Guttenberg printing press.

I was at a Christian education meeting this past week in New St. James and a discussion occurred about the connected world our children are in. Then a bright young parent said that our children still need authentic face to face connection rather than virtual text, Instagram or video connection. There is an opportunity there for our young people at New St. James. Can we provide authentic, personal connection that is face to face and real? People are craving connection. That is why churches that thrive create small groups of people **at similar life stages**. One church I know of created 18 new small groups this fall alone. It is a thriving church and it is older. So, is there hope for New St. James? You bet. The research is out there. We know that Kotter's 8 stage process works. We know that in every disruptive change there is also opportunity. What we need to do as a congregation is to create with prayer, resolution and faith, a **dual operating system to manage change opportunities** and we will position New St. James for the future.

One more thing and it is **so** important: we need to bring love to the process!

I believe that **New St. James will survive and accommodate change if we remember to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. I am also confident because I have experienced that kind of love here in New St. James.**

Little kids have trouble accommodating change just like we do, And Love helps them accommodate too. Let me tell you a story...

First day at Preschool can be pretty frightening to a little kid. So much change to accommodate all at once! Patty Zeitlin was a preschool nanny. On the first day of school there was a little girl in the hall crying. Her mother had had to leave and the little girl was supposed to wear shoes and she had none. So, a well-meaning parent had come along with a pair of shoes for the little girl to wear. "Everyone, has to wear shoes at school!" she said. But the little girl threw them down with an emphatic "No!" and began hitting anyone who came near her. Her screams grew so loud that all the children in the room stopped what they were doing and stared in disbelief! The child was left alone still screaming in the hall.

Patty, as a school Nanny, asked if she could help. She had taught preschool and had helped other kids adjust, **but only after they had gotten acquainted**. This little girl and her were complete strangers.

So, what to do? She took a small chair and sat beside the little girl. She sat there just listening. Suddenly the little girl pointed at the door that led to the outside and Patty intuiting asked: "Did mommy go out?" Right away she screamed "Mommy, mommy, mommy!" Now she was sounding more scared than angry. It suddenly dawned on Patty that perhaps the little girl did not know that mommy would come back. And so she said "Mommy went out the door, but mommy is coming back." The child stopped sobbing and for the first time looked straight at her. Then Patty remembered a song that she had used for another child and sang it to her: *Mommy goes out but Mommy comes back; Mommy goes out but Mommy comes back, mommy comes back, O back O!* Though the little girl's dark eyes were still teary, she slowly settled down. Patty sang it several times, and then the little girl reached out and Patty picked up her small hand, and her shoes, and said "Want to go play now?" She nodded yes, and so they played with a train for a few minutes. She was smiling now, even laughing with Patty. Soon it was easy to put the shoes on. Patty did not know why the child had so much difficulty accommodating the change to wear shoes. What really was going on she wondered? That is until her mother came in to pick her up. The mother was wearing a Sari *and her feet were bare*. What had made the difference? Patty had reached out with compassion to try to understand why the child was having difficulty accommodating change. As soon as the child felt secure and loved, she put the shoes on just fine.

So too with New St. James and accommodating change. Change can be difficult, but if we feel secure and loved, if we support one another, if we put our hands into the hands of God, which is better than a known way: then we will be led to find God's way through the Wilderness, a way that leads to the streams in the wasteland, that will nourish our souls!"

"For I know the plans I have for you" declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future!

Amen.