

A Sermon preached by Elder Bob Sillars at Clarence Presbyterian Church on Sunday, November 13, 2022.

Change and Celebration

Oh, sing to the Lord a new song for he has done marvelous things. Psalm 98:1

In the coming year we are going to be singing a new song at Clarence Presbyterian Church. Our long-time pastor, Rev. Dr. Gregory Hall, will be retiring in May. One thing is certain; things will be different. There will be changes. For now it means a lot of mystery; we don't know who our new minister will be; will this person be male or female; when will our new pastor start? Lots of questions, and for now, we don't have answers. We do know that with a new pastor, things will be different.

Change is something that all of us face throughout our lives. We take on a new job; we move to a new town or a new neighborhood. We attend a new school or move up to a new grade. We meet new people; we begin new relationships; friends and family move and die. All of these events bring about change.

Some changes are easier than others. Sometimes changes can bring about anxiety and fear. Other changes can bring great joy.

All of these changes affect us in many ways. Worry about our new job; will it be all that we have anticipated? Will the new neighborhood be as nice and as friendly as it seemed when driving down the street and looking at the new house or apartment? Will our teachers and classmates at the new school as good as the last ones? Will our new friendships be as strong as the old ones? How will we get along without a lost loved one? So many questions, so many concerns

Our church is 205 years old. Over those two centuries, we have changed time and again. In the 1800's we moved from our initial location in Newstead to what is now the Brickhall at the corner of Main Street and Salt Road. Our Presbyterian forefathers, worshipping at the Brickhall building heard the scriptures sounding like this morning's reading from the Gospel of John. You may have thought that it sounded a little odd to our twenty first century ears. That's because I read it from the King James Version. The King James Version was first published in 1611, at about the same time as Shakespeare was writing his plays. For those who didn't struggle through the King James Version, you at least probably struggled through Shakespeare in school. Many love the beauty of the language of Shakespeare and the King James; others, well, not so much. We have changed and moved on to more familiar language.

Our congregation moved to this site in 1956. What is now Fellowship Hall was our sanctuary until we moved here about a dozen years ago. We changed.

If you walk down the hall and up the stairs to our Fellowship Hall, you will see some pictures on the wall at the top of the stairs. There are individual pictures of our

last five installed pastors. There is also a collage which includes pictures of eight more ministers of this church. Each of these ministers has been different. Some of us remember one or more of them, some of us don't. Those pictures bring back memories for some, yet remind all of us of the changes that have happened in this congregation.

The great 20th century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote about change. He wrote: "change is the essence of life". For him it's really about how we respond to change. Niebuhr is credited with the authorship of the serenity prayer. The serenity prayer goes like this: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can change, and wisdom to know the difference."

Change permeates our lives, our society and popular culture. In my youth, Bob Dylan sang that "The times they are a-changin'". A decade later, David Bowie reminded us to "turn and face the changes". When I was growing up a telephone had a dial and wires. It was plugged in to the wall. Now the phones in our pockets are not only telephones, but cameras, TVs, music players and computers with over a million times the computing power of the NASA computers that sent a man to the moon. Yes, the times they are a-changin'.

Greg has announced that he will retire at the end of May 2023. His retirement will mark a significant change in the life of our church. Planning for this change has been underway for many months. There are two special committees that have been formed.

One is the PNC, the Pastor Nominating Committee. They will select a candidate to present as our new Minister. They have already started the process and have just now begun reviewing resumes from possible candidates. This process will take many months and will be extremely confidential.

We are one of the larger churches in our Presbytery. There have been a couple of recent retirements where, like us, the church had at least a year's notice of the pending retirement. In Youngstown Rev. Stewart retired at the end of August and the new Pastor started in September. A year ago, at Westminster, Rev. Yorty retired in May and the new Pastor started in October.

The other committee is the Transition Team, of which I am a member. The Transition Team is responsible for arranging for filling in gaps that may occur between Greg's departure and the arrival of our new Pastor. It is important to remember that under our Presbyterian polity, when Greg leaves, he leaves. He will sign a Covenant of Closure, to allow us to move on with new pastoral leadership. He will not be available for weddings, funerals and other events. He has made it very clear that he will comply with Presbyterian polity. That means that if asked to participate in the life of this church or to perform a funeral or wedding related to this congregation, he will say no.

The other major responsibility of the Transition Team is to celebrate Greg's 20 years of ministry in Clarence. Today's gospel reading was about a wedding, the

wedding at Cana. Scripture doesn't talk about who was getting married. We only know that it was a wedding.

All of us know about weddings. Weddings bring two people together to begin their lives together. It's about change, the transition to a new phase in the lives of the newlyweds. Weddings are also a cause for celebration.

So, we, too, are going to celebrate the transition in our church, from the ministry of Rev. Dr. Gregory Hall. There is a lot to celebrate, the past 20 years have been great. We have a wonderful facility. Ministry here is strong.

So how are we going to celebrate? We have several things planned. We are planning two significant events in May. These events are timed to coincide with Greg's last Sunday, May 21, 2023.

The first one will be on Saturday, May 6. This event will be open to all. In addition to our church family, we will invite the larger community. This means people from Clarence and Western New York who have been impacted by Greg and his ministry. It will also include his colleagues in ministry from this Presbytery and beyond. This will be a come-and-go reception. We are not currently planning a program or speeches for this event. Instead, it will be an informal event for people to stop by and greet Greg and perhaps speak with a friend or two. This event is designed to allow people to greet Greg and then move on to the rest of their day. The reception will be held at the church in Fellowship Hall.

The second event is a brunch party at Samuel's Grand Manor. This will be after church on Sunday, May 21, following Greg's final service. This event is for our church family. We are working on plans to make the event affordable so that as many members of our church family as possible can participate. While our kitchen team does a wonderful job for so many events, we are going off site to allow everyone to enjoy the celebration.

It is our hope that all of you will be able to participate in one or both of these events. But, that's not all. We also are working on plans for additional ways that you can participate in the continuing celebration of Greg's ministry in Clarence. Stay tuned.

We are in a time of change at Clarence Presbyterian. Together, we will sing a new song.

It's time to turn and face the changes. It's time to celebrate Greg's ministry. Let us rejoice and be glad, in gratitude for the last 20 years and in anticipation of the marvelous things to come.