***SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT!***

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Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21 and Luke 19:28-40

*Try something different*! It sounds like an ad for a new fast-food menu option: *New Barbequed Beet and Brussel Sprout Burgers! Try something different!* Or the promo for an innovative beverage brand: *Dandelion Delight! Try something different!* But as a spiritual discipline, *Try something different!* hardly seems to fit with prayer and fasting and all those other practices that seek to bring us closer to God. Is it misplaced in this sermon series, or might there be a way in which trying something different can draw us closer to God? I suppose the easy answer is: Sure. Try something different like praying or fasting! That may bring you closer to God. Okay, but might trying something different in and of itself, apart from those other spiritual practices, offer holy possibilities?

Different isn’t always at the top of the list for Presbyterians. You know the old riddle:

*Q: How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?*

*A: Change! What do you mean change! My grandmother gave that light bulb!*

But that is not our heritage! We are a self-described church that is Reformed in its theology but is always being re-formed under the guidance of the Spirit. We trust that God’s Spirit is constantly at work in our midst to guide us in new directions and inspire in us new possibilities for ministry and mission. “We’ve never done it that way before” is not an excuse for not trying something different, just an acknowledgement of where we’ve been. That is not to say that change for the sake of change is a spiritual practice; but it is to say that God’s Spirit is dynamic and can surprise us with what God has in mind for us individually and as a community. Something different may be a new way of *doing* things, but it may also be a new perspective or a new way of *looking at* things.

This Palm Sunday offers a shining example of that kind of change. After walking all over Galilee to preach and teach and heal, Jesus arranges to ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. This is no impromptu ride. It is an intentional act on Jesus’ part as he tells the disciples exactly where to get the young colt and what to say – *the Lord needs it* – in order to secure his ride for him. He climbs on it – a colt that has never been ridden – and instead of being thrown off, begins his leisurely ride down from the Mount of Olives up to the city gates of Jerusalem. It is something different from anything he has done before, but it is not randomly different. It is an intentional act to evoke images of the prophecy of Zechariah:

*Lo, your king comes to you;*

*triumphant and victorious is he,*

*humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey.*

The people respond with a carpet of palms and cloaks (though the palms are lacking in Luke’s account) and with shouts of:

*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*

The people make the royal connection, and so do the Pharisees who are so fearful that this royal parade will attract the attention of the Romans that they beg Jesus to stop it and silence the crowd. But Jesus says, nothing can stop it, for if the disciples fell silent, the stones themselves would shout out. All creation celebrates his coming.

What kind of king are they cheering? A different kind of king from Herod or Caesar who came riding into town on white warhorses. Humility is characteristic of this king. Holiness is characteristic of this king. Yet the continuing hope of the people is that he will be the kind of messianic king they have been expecting – one who will call in an angel army and kick out the Romans and claim the throne as God’s chosen one. Is he the king they wanted? Absolutely! But his kingdom is a different kind of kingdom from what they expected. Their hopes and dreams were still pinned to the past, to reestablishing the glorious kingdom of David, to making Israel great again. They were hailing Jesus as a different kind of king, but in the end, they failed to see that his kingdom was a different kind of kingdom. As New Testament scholar Tom Wright notes:

*The establishment of God’s kingdom means the dethroning of the world’s kingdoms, not in order to replace them with another one of basically the same sort (one that makes its way through superior force of arms), but in order to replace it with one whose power is the power of the servant and whose strength is the strength of love.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is that different kind of kingdom that Jesus taught about, that kind of kingdom he illustrated with his parables, a kingdom rooted in love and service and sacrifice, a kingdom unlike any kingdom Israel had ever known. And if the people never really grasped that, never really understood what he was trying to tell them about God’s kingdom, perhaps it is because they were still so focused on the past.

In the passage we heard from Isaiah earlier, the Lord tells the people not to remember the former things or consider the things of old, because the Lord is about to do a new thing. God knows we can get stuck in the past and limit our imaginations to what we have known and seen and experienced in days gone by. We come out of a pandemic and want life to go back to the way it was before the pandemic instead of imagining a way of life that is post-pandemic with new opportunities and possibilities arising from what we have learned about ourselves and our world in these last two years. We pine for “the good old days” instead of looking ahead to “the great new days” to come. Vladimir Putin goes to war to try to recreate the Soviet Union. As Chip Hardwick notes in the current edition of *Presbyterians Today*, we find ourselves looking in the rearview mirror rather than looking ahead to new possibilities. “*Living faithfully*,” he suggests, “*means mastering the time forward and backward*.”[[2]](#endnote-2)We can look to the past, we can celebrate it, we can learn from it, as long as we don’t get stuck in it!

God never seems to get stuck in the past. Again and again, God seems willing to try something different in order to further God’s plan. When a king is to be chosen for Israel, God selects the runt of Jesse’s litter – young David – rather than his older brothers who look far more kingly to Samuel’s eye. When Nineveh repents of its sins, God has mercy on them instead of destroying the city as God had planned – much to Jonah’s chagrin. When God needs someone to bear God’s son, it is a humble peasant girl who is selected – Mary – rather than a princess in the seat of power. When Jesus needs disciples to follow him, learn from him, and continue his kingdom building project in the world, he selects not noted scholars or men of power and prestige, but a ragtag bunch of fishermen and tax collectors, people no one expected, people from the margins of society. All of those choices defied logic or credentials that suggested they would be the right choice for God’s holy purposes. God chose them anyway, and in so doing confirmed that it was God working through them that gave rise to their good work, not the merits alone of those who had been chosen. For, with God all things are possible – and by all things, God means ALL things!

Which brings us back to *trying something different* as a spiritual discipline. If God is willing to try something different from time to time, perhaps we who are created in the image of God might find it worthwhile as well. It does not mean we change for the sake of change, but it does mean being open to the possibility that God may be doing something new in our midst that may require us to look at things from a new perspective or do something new or at least in a new way. W.E.B. Du Bois suggests: “*The most important thing to remember is this: to be ready at any moment to give up what you are for what you might become*.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

I remember talking with an older man who was chronically unhappy and was leaving the church. “I am just too old to change,” he said. When are we ever too old to change, too old to try something different, too old to be open to something new that God might do through us – and I am preaching to myself as well as to all of you on this count! Such obstinate resistance to new possibilities denies the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit that is continuing to do wonderful things in our midst – like inspiring us to broadcast our services online during a pandemic, something different that now extends our ministries far beyond the walls of this building in a new way.

It just may be that in trying something different, we may find a new way that God will use us and in so doing we may draw closer to God and closer to being the people God calls us to be. But you will never know if that is the case or not, if you are unwilling to even try! How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Just one, and who knows, in trying something different, that one just may be you! Amen

1. N.T. Wright, *How God Became King*, HarperOne: New York, 2012, p.205 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Chip Hardwick, “Windshields and rearview mirrors”, *Presbyterians Today*, March/April 2022, p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. W.E.B. Du Bois quoted by Cory Booker, *United*, Ballantine Books: New York, 2016, p.22 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)