

The Seven Last Words of the Church  
 Acts 11:1-18  
 Tracy Hartman  
 Farmville Baptist Church  
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Have you heard of the seven last words of the church? They are “We never did it that way before.” We never did it that way before.

Often we say these words when we’re in a time of transition or change and that has certainly described every church everywhere lately hasn’t it? We’ve all had to change the way we worship as COVID 19 closed our buildings and now as we try to reopen them. We’ve had to adapt to a variety of online formats, and Farmville, you have done that admirably.

However, if we’re honest, many of us resist change, no matter how sorely it is needed. Someone once said that the only ones who really like change are wet babies. Psychologist Richard Dobbins puts it this way, “Until the pain of remaining the same is greater than the pain of changing, we will stay the same.” Instead of welcoming change, we often feel threatened by innovations and new ideas, we long for the tradition and long-standing customs that provide us comfort in a world of constant flux and instability.

In Acts chapter 11 Peter has experienced a life-changing event and one with far reaching implications for the church. When the chapter opens, he is reporting to the Jerusalem council about the wondrous things that had occurred in Joppa and Caesarea and he had been praying on the roof when he saw this strange vision of a sheet full of forbidden animals descending from heaven. He hears a voice saying, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.” Peter replies, “By no means Lord,” which pretty much means, “We never did it that way before.” But the voice of God comes to Peter a second time, and it changes everything. “What God has made clean, you must

not call profane.ö Not only does Peter see this vision once, he sees it three times. As soon as this strange event is over, three men appear at Peter's door asking him to come with him to Caesarea to tell them about Jesus. These folks were Gentiles, non-Jews, unclean people. Can't you just hear Peter, even after the visions, thinking, öWe never did it that way before.ö However, the Spirit urges him to go, and then the Spirit falls upon the gathering and the Gentiles are saved. Peter and the other Jews with him are amazed that the Spirit has been given to the Gentiles. Peter says, öCan anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?ö

Peter and his friends were convinced that God was about a new work that day, but the Jewish believers in Jerusalem certainly were not. Their first response when Peter appears before them was criticism: Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them? Or, öWhat are you doing, öwe've never done it that way before.ö Although the presenting issue is ritual purity and not eating with people who were unclean, it is likely that the church leaders are really concerned with the solidarity of the community, about the unity of the body. To help them come to a new way of thinking and being, which is exactly what happened to Peter on the roof in Joppa, Peter recounts the whole story to the group, ending with öIf then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?ö After this, all the critics are silent ó and then they praise God. It was enough for that day, but not the end of the struggle.

In Acts 15, the issue comes up again. The members of the Council have accepted the idea that God can save the Gentiles, but now the question is, do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to become Christians? Must they be circumcised and follow the law of Moses in order to also follow Christ? Must they become like us to become part of our community? Acts 15:6 tells

us there was òmuch debate,ö ó does that sound like a quarterly business meeting or a monthly committee meeting to you? In the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul is dealing again with this very issue - letting us know that our biblical friends, like us, tended to resist change and then struggle with transition as they learned what it meant to live into their new reality.

What if those believers who held to òWe've never done it that way beforeö had carried the day? They might have spared themselves some disagreement and they might have spared themselves the embarrassment of some failure ó because when we try new things they don't always work. But, they would have missed being a part of a mighty movement of God among them. (PAUSE)

Fast forward with me over two thousand years to right here, in this moment. Like the early church in our Scripture passage this morning, in addition to dealing with COVID, we are a church in the middle of transition and change. Here at Farmville, God is at work preparing this family of faith for a new vision. God is preparing this congregation for a new leader and God is preparing a new leader to come here. Some would call this a potential Kairos moment ó an opening of ourselves toward a new way of being and doing church. Soon we will resume our Town Hall meetings and the pastoral search process, and I anticipate that we will have some spirited discussions, and that we may have to make some decisions that may not be easy. All though this transition time will have challenges, those challenges are good signs that God is in the middle of bringing about some exciting new work here.

But lest we get too comfortable, the Scripture has words of both affirmation and challenge for us this morning. For just as Peter made some key assumptions at the beginning of this chapter of his ministry, it could be easy for us to succumb to the same temptation. Resist the urge to say, òWe've never done it that way before.ö When a new pastor comes, remember that it

is very unlikely that he or she will lead in the same way as pastors you have had before. He or she will quickly come to love you and love this place just as you are, but implicit in the concept of leadership is the idea that you need to be going somewhere. Some of you may object to some of the new directions that the congregation chooses to take, and that will be nothing new either. What happened when Peter baptized Cornelius's family and warmly included them in the church? The believers in Jerusalem criticized him. The passage that we read today is his account of his actions to the church leaders. Of course I am not advocating that you follow any leader blindly — you're free thinking and free spirited Baptists after all, but as you honor and celebrate your rich history and tradition, resist the urge to say, "we've never done it that way before." Be open to how God is at work and don't be afraid to think outside the box, because that's often when the most amazing things happen.

That's what happened to Tabernacle Baptist, the church that I attend in Richmond. In the 1960s, when white flight to the suburbs started in many cities across the south, Tabernacle made the intentional decision to remain in the heart of the city, and a period of steady decline began. At their peak, they had the largest Sunday School on the eastern seaboard, but by the early 2000s, about 75 faithful members found themselves praying for God to show them the next chapter. They called a young man named Sterling Severns to be their pastor — and for the first several years of his tenure, his two children were the only ones in the nursery. The church continued to pray and wait and discern. Then on World Communion Sunday in 2007, two refugee families came through our doors. Within a few short months, ¼ to 1/3 of our congregation was from one of the people groups native to Myanmar, and most of them spoke little to no English. For TBC members, welcoming and walking alongside our newest members meant partnering with resettlement agencies like Church World Services to help secure housing,

furniture and household goods. It meant helping with job searches, navigating public transportation, and teaching folks how to drive. It meant being primary emergency contacts for school aged children because mom and dad didn't speak English. It meant that Sunday School lessons focused on ESL, citizenship and home ownership as often as they focused on Scripture lessons. It meant that the sanctuary usually had what we call a liturgical installation of visual elements that help those who don't speak English as a first language as well as long time members to worship more fully. It meant that one or more elements of the worship service were led by our newest members in their heart language. Although those changes were met with some resistance, Louise Cochrane, one of the oldest and most respected church members at the time, remarked, that although she couldn't understand the prayer or the Scripture reading that day, God could, and that was what really mattered. It meant that our whole congregation was transformed as we made this transition to a multi-culture church together. God was writing a new story for a new day.

Very few of the Burmese worship with us on Sunday morning anymore, they now have well established indigenous churches of some of which meet in our building and some that have launched out on their own. Some 13 years later, the church, once again, finds itself in a season of waiting and prayer and discernment to see what God has in store for us next.

The one thing that remains is the presence of children. Back in the early 2000s, when Sterling and Laura's children were the only two in the nursery, we prayed specifically for God to send us children. Not only did God bring Burmese children, but because of our refugee work, and our commitment to make the faith formation of children and youth a core value, God brought us young families. Before COVID led to the closing of our church building, over 200 people worshipped at Tabernacle on a given Sunday morning. The first Wednesday night of the

school year last fall, we had over 70 children in the building for choir, Bible study, mission activity, and homework assistance.

Friends, what might God want to do through us as individuals and this place as we move forward in the next chapter of our story? We don't know yet. What is becoming clear to churches all over the country is that there is no going back to normal, whatever that was. What we will all need going forward is obvious, deliberate, structural change. Change moves at the speed of trust. As we move forward in this process, may we trust God and trust each as we open ourselves to the journey ó because I believe God has great plans for Farmville Baptist.