



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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**Discipleship 2007: Impact for Another 175 Years**

**September 16, 2007**

**Dr. Matthew J. Hook**

**2 Corinthians 5:17**

**Introduction to Worship:** As I was looking over the 175 year history of Dexter UMC, I had an a ha moment. A major insight occurred to me: Everything we looked back at and remember fondly has a common denominator: CHANGE. And as people were going through it, they probably weren't feeling fond about it! But once we make it through the change, we realize the growth and learning that occurred.

Those initial 12 people...the gift of land and the first church building...the rebuilding of the church in 1925...building of the Christian Ed Building in 1966 which is now the Dexter Library...the purchase of Camp Newkirk in 1984...building the buildings and moving here in 1994...the sanctuary in 1998... All those big things would have fallen apart if the people weren't being faithful in the small things. Don't wait for the "big" moments. Be faithful in the small things: How treat one another. How you pray. How you give of yourself to the life of the congregation and the community. And God will lead us.

I don't care much for change, when it happens in my own life. But as I look back at my life, those breakthroughs and times of growth that I look back at with pride tended to be those times of major change and upheaval. And I realize: In these times, if we as a body can learn to lead in the midst of change, the changeless God of change can impact the world through us!

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*"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" 2 Corinthians 5:17*

There's something to be said about being 175 years old. We've been celebrating all year long in various ways, for good reason: Church experts talk about 20—40 year life-cycles of churches. They usually break down into 4 phases: The initial excitement and growth after birth—phase, the learning and growth as more people bring resources—phase, the getting comfortable with where you've landed—phase, which is usually when the church levels off, leading into the final life-cycle, which is usually a period of decline, *if nothing changes*. And what began with momentum as a movement becomes memorialized as a monument, till the monument becomes a mausoleum. I'm here to say I want to be part of a movement! And our verse for this morning is part of the reason. 2 Cor. 5:17 *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old has gone the new has come!"* The church is made up of people who have been transformed—changed, not seeing with old eyes, or judging with old prejudice, or hanging on to old habits, but seeing with new eyes of faith; judging with understanding and love; and embracing new ways of living that leave no time for old habits, because we've allowed God to change what we care about. (Remember, we're changing what people care about, not just what they believe). *The old has gone, the new has come!* And without that change, a church would have only one life cycle.

Church, it has been the hope of every pastor who has served here that each of you would be able to your story of how you came to faith in Christ. But can you tell a "beyond salvation story" when God reaches down and rocks your world, and the new comes? That's what Paul means when he says *"the old has gone, the new has come!"* The Apostle Peter had a second conversion in Acts 10. Peter was a Christ-follower who had kept all the Jewish laws, and along comes some men who say "Peter, give the message of Christ to us gentiles."

Now, Peter's never even crossed the threshold of a non-Jew. In those days it was considered unclean. But these men came for him just after Peter's vision (with the giant sheet) when God shows him there are no unclean animals. And Peter decided "I'm going to cross the threshold." Imagine how huge that was for him: it was totally new ground, something that his entire culture and upbringing told him was wrong. But it was Peter acting obediently. He goes into this gentile house of Cornelius and his friends and says "You know, I'm sure this is weird for you too. Jews just don't do this—visit and relax with people of another race. But God has shown me that no race is better than any other. So the minute I was sent for, I came."

Peter says "It's God's own truth: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone." Acts 10:34—36 The Message.

And Peter shared the Gospel truth with them: Jesus, anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, went through the country helping people and healing everyone who was beaten down by the Devil...and we saw it, everything he did...and they killed him, hung him on a cross. But in 3 days God had him up, alive, and out where he could be seen...He commissioned us to bear witness that he is in fact the One whom God destined as Judge of the living and dead. But we're not alone in this. Our witness that he is the means to forgiveness of sins is backed up by the witness of all the prophets." And it happened: The Holy Spirit was manifest in these foreigners and they converted and were baptized!

What a time! Peter must've thought "Wow. I could have spent every day of my life on this side of the reality!" He was one decision away from missing out on this.

The news traveled fast, and the next day Peter met some of his old friends who scolded him and criticized him. "Gentiles? Peter, what were you thinking? You'd better watch out. It's a slippery slope!" But after Peter explained the story, it sunk in, and they too were praising God. His second conversion was almost as powerful as the first. And Peter took the message to the whole rest of the world and changed the course of his life!

I've had second conversions, and I hope you have too, when you look at your life, or you walk into church, and you say "Oh no. I don't think I've seen this quite right..." And I want to invite you today to consider your second wind. Don't just window shop. Get quiet before God and let him touch you deeply.

Some of my second conversions: I became a believer when I was pretty little. As a matter of fact, I grew up in the church and can't pinpoint my first conversion.

- But I can remember in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade "Wanting to do what Jesus would do." (Way before WWJD). If only I'd have written down the initials on a little rubber bracelet!
- In jr. high realizing Jesus loved the unlovable people, so they were okay with me too.
- In high school realizing God had a purpose for me and for everyone, and if I was being who God created me to be, and somebody cut me down, they weren't just cutting me down, they were cutting God down.
- And in college I realized God would always love me, no matter if I hated God or myself.
- And senior year, my biggest second conversion happened sitting on a NY subway wondering how many people had the confidence I had, knowing the Creator of the universe cared about them personally. And me thinking "They need to know. I'd better get started." Cancel your career plans; this is more important. Give your life to me.
- Hearing Bill Hybels speak about what church could be like. He was mostly quoting Acts 2: "*They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*" Acts 2:42-47. And when he quoted his old seminary professor who said "If one such community existed, why can't it exist again?" And till my dying breath, I'll cast that vision. The church is the hope

of the world, because the church has been entrusted with the message of the Gospel. I'll use my life for that. The challenge is bringing Christ to a lost and hurting world, not giving ourselves over to a lesser dream.

- Realizing that if people could only catch a vision of what Christ wants to do in them and through them, they would lay their lives on the line for such a cause. Just like those first century Christians. Just like the people called Methodist. Just like those circuit riders who risked everything to minister and help people far from God. Just like those sent into overseas missions. The second conversion becomes the second wind, the Holy Spirit will breathe new life into your situation.

What will the next 175 years look like? I don't know exactly. But imagine if those first 12 people who met in the east wing of Judge Dexter's house felt complete. After all, change is hard. Imagine if they each said "I've had mine. I'm set. This is perfect." Imagine if they never had any second conversions. Imagine if the church burned and people didn't see the vision of the church reaching decades into the future? Imagine if the opportunity to purchase the Boy Scout Camp came and went, because we didn't want to change. Imagine if the people couldn't imagine moving out of the old church?

And now, God has placed us to be His spiritual leaders for such a time as this. The problem is, as leaders we feel pressure to tell people things we don't know. So we sort of make them up. But spiritual leadership is not the ability to define everything the future holds. It is the willingness to move forward when all you know is God. Discipleship 2007?

This week—even today, I want you to tell someone your second conversion stories. Stop staring at the threshold you've never crossed; because you never know what that is holding you back from that will open up a whole new world for you. One of your second conversions could be the second wind to lead this church or many churches to be the hope of the world for 175 years to come, or even for all eternity. Amen.