

NEVER RETURN TO WHAT HASN'T WORKED

How many have heard this definition of insanity: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

Although this has been attributed to Albert Einstein, the first time this quote appeared in print was in a 1981 Narcotics Anonymous guide book. It is a good reminder to all of us that we should never go back to what hasn't worked.

This may seem to fly in the face what we believe about redemption as Christians. As humans, we expect to falter and stumble and even fall down, but God promises there is always a second chance for us. So let's be clear: There is nothing wrong with trying again when we fail. We may try to fix a broken relationship, a bad business deal or a dream that doesn't live up to our expectations.

But for redemption to occur, says Dr. Henry Cloud says, something must be different. “A second chance is not a repeat of the first chance,” he writes. “A second chance is a moving *forward* to something *new*. ... If everything's the same, you are repeating what already has been, and there is no reason to think the outcome will be different.”¹

How many times have we or loved ones tried to reconcile expecting that things will be different – only to find out that they are exactly the same as the first time? The illustration Dr. Cloud used was a woman who had been in a relationship for four years – not counting the time each year that they would break up. But she kept going back to the same guy because of the things she liked in him without considering that within a short time, she would again feel like the guy was taking her for granted.

¹ Dr. Henry Cloud, *Never Go Back: 10 Things You'll Never Do Again* (Howard Books: New York, NY, 2014), p. 15.

Therefore, before we would go back to anything that didn't work the first time, Dr. Cloud says we need to intentionally and thoughtfully ask ourselves these three questions:

1) Am I different in some way that would make this work? We can't be attempting a second chance if the only reason is we are sad, lonely or need to be rescued. A second chance is warranted not because we desire something different, but because we are different.

2) Is the *other person* or persons different in some way that would make this work? Just being sorry is not enough; the thing that caused the problem in the first place has to have changed or else we will soon be back in the same unacceptable situation.

3) Is the *situation* fundamentally different in some way that would make this work? There might be something about outside forces – the economy, the leadership of a business – that has changed that will lead to the possibility of a different outcome. We can't go back to the same situation, but can go back if something about that situation has changed.²

If the answer is no to all three questions, then we are not going forward into something new – we are simply putting ourselves into reverse and going back to where we were before.

The people of Israel felt like this was the case for them in Isaiah 43. The prophet Isaiah begins this chapter reminding the Jews that at one time, they were captives in Egypt. Yet God parted the Red Seas and had Moses lead them to safety while destroying the army that pursued them. In the course of the next 700 years, God led them on into the Promised Land where they settled. First they lived in the land as 12 separate tribes operating as a confederacy. Later under King David, they created one nation. Even when that nation split into two kingdoms, the Jews thought they were invincible to outsiders because God was on their side.

² Ibid., pp. 18-22.

But with that sense of pride came a great price: they forgot about God. They disobeyed His laws, taking God's protection for granted. Around 700 BC, God allowed the Assyrians to destroy the northern kingdom; 200 years later, the Babylonians overthrew the southern kingdom of Judah. All of the people were once again slaves in a far-off land.

At the time Isaiah writes Chapter 43, Jerusalem is no more; the Temple has been destroyed. Yet in the midst of all of this despair, Isaiah offers hope. Once again, he says, God is going to make a way.

While our opening verses call to mind the way the exodus occurred, Isaiah gives an even greater promise to the people: God is going to do a new thing. God is on the verge of breaking all the patterns of the past behavior, including that overwhelming memory of what God did at the Red Sea. Whereas God parted the waters for Moses, Isaiah promises that God is going to make a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

Things will be the same, but different. God is not a museum curator, keeping things the way they were. No, God is the Creator and Recreator. Being God's people means we need to be vigilant to perceive where and how God is doing a new thing among us.

I was very startled this past week when another pastor came to see me in the office. I thought he was coming just to offer congratulations as I prepare to retire, but he told me his church is preparing to apply for a loan to do some remodeling of their building. Even with the remodeling, however, they have an issue every Sunday with a lack of parking.

So the reason he came to see me, he said, was because for a couple of months, he has been hearing rumors that the Reed City United Methodist Church is going to be put up for sale. Before his congregation put time and energy into getting a loan set up for remodeling, he said,

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he wanted to stop and ask me about this rumor because their first desire would be to simply buy this building.

Had the pastor come to see me on Monday instead of Tuesday, I would have been sure it was an April Fool's Day prank. But he was absolutely serious.

I assured him this building is not for sale. I also told him that what may have happened was like the old game of telephone. We have talked frankly about our finances and cuts we have had to make in paid personnel. We also have talked about the possibility that we will seek to become a two-point charge with another congregation so as to share the expenses of a pastor. But we most certainly do not expect to sell this building or close our ministry, even as a new pastor prepares to come on board here.

Does that mean that ministry will continue here the same way it always has? Absolutely not. Pastor Kristen will be bringing new ideas and new energy. A couple of weeks ago, she came for a meeting at Grant Center where new models for ministry were shared – models that frankly scared the bejeebers out of some folks. But that meeting has already sparked some conversation at the Leadership Team on Thursday as to the future of this congregation.

We can believe in going forward and not going back because we are led by a God who does new things – who makes a way through the wilderness and offers streams in dry places. For those dry spiritual places in our lives right now, I invite us to prepare our hearts as we prepare to receive communion this morning.