

A Change is Gonna Come
First United Oak Park
25 September 2011

Good morning. What a pleasure to be with you here – finally! Thank you, Julie and Leah, for inviting me and working with my crazy schedule to get me here. I know and love a number of people in this congregation and look forward to getting to know more of you. Your vision statement is beautiful and inspiring – the whole thing. I especially appreciate your – “No one will be a spectator” and your emphasis on relationship. And I know you do and will continue to astonish people with your acts of love.

I bring you greetings from the community that is Chicago Theological Seminary – the faculty, the staff, the students, the trustees, and the alums. Our primary mission at CTS is to rigorously educate women and men to be religious leaders, teachers, and ministers of transformation for the society toward greater justice and mercy. We have about 220 students that range in age from 22 to 70. They come from all over the country – and all over the world – countries include Canada, Kenya, Japan, South Korea, Ghana, China, Nigeria, Germany, Paraguay, Haiti, Myanmar, India, South Africa, Taiwan and the Philippines. They represent many faith traditions: AME, AME Zion, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Christian Missionary Alliance, Church of God in Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Mormon, Episcopal, Mennonite, Evangelical Lutheran, Pentecostal, Society of Friends, Presbyterian (Korea), United Church of Canada, United Methodist, Roman Catholic, Unitarian Universalist Association, non-denominational, even – unaffiliated, and, of course, the United Church of Christ. These students are passionate about providing progressive religious leadership in our world today. We are excited about what they are doing and will do. And we are excited about things happening at CTS. We are adding more and more online classes (you are welcome to check us out) and we are excited about our new state-of-the-art building – we’ll move to the Woodlawn community at 60th and Dorchester this coming January. We welcome you for a visit anytime. You are welcome as a visitor – or as a student! – a special student for a course or two – or as a full time student! And so – I bring you greetings from CTS. And I thank you for welcoming me here. I am thankful to be among this people of God.

Let’s pause for a moment of prayer.

I used to think that life was neat and orderly—and that change was something that happened sometimes – usually—if not—always as preordained. I still believed that with my whole being when I was 16 years old. In fact, when I was 16 – I knew everything – the whole world was constant – and all everyone had to do was to live right – be like me – and everything would meet the fairy tale and be hunky-dorey! Life was easy then—I thought. But... something happened. Dents appeared in my carefully constructed walls of illusion. Slowly – **very** slowly – it has dawned upon me. Change happens all the time – continually – in all spaces and times. Everything changes. It took me a long time to learn that everything must change. Nothing stays the same. Change happens. Change. Even right now – I am different – you are different – we are different together

than we were one day ago – because we know differently today than we knew ten years ago, one year ago, yesterday. We are constantly facing change – good change, difficult change, little change, big change, exciting change, un-asked-for change. But – for some reason (or another) - we don't acknowledge continual change – in fact – our structures and institutions push for / demand immutability – and so we do not immediately recognize continual change in our lives. I resisted the notion of continual change – I'm not sure why – maybe because I want permanence and transcendence. But I am learning that accepting continual change brings a certain amount of comfort and a sense of vital expectation. Some people are forced by life circumstances to explicitly accept continual change as a way of being. I listened to Michael J. Fox not long ago about his life - which includes living with Parkinson's disease. He said – "Life changes all the time – what you want and what happens - don't necessarily coincide. Change in my life is like having a 4-year-old climbing on you all the time. And what I've learned is to have no fear – no fear of failure." Michael J. Fox's life demands his recognition of continual change. His response – and ours – is the key.

How do we choose to respond to continual change? How do we respond to the choices we must continually make because of continual change? My father used to say to me – Alice – it is not what happens to you that matters – it is how you respond to what happens to you that matters. My teenage self responded (internally) – Yeah Yeah Yeah – *BUT* – it is not what happens to you that matters – it is how you respond to what happens to you that matters. Your choices matter. Change comes – and so we have to make choices. And this is where perhaps we can glean something from the texts for today. Let's take a look at our text today – Deuteronomy 30:11-20. Now – as you know – bible is my area of research – and so this translation is not the KJV or the NIV or the TEV or even the NRSV – it is the CTSV according to AH – just for today. And I encourage you to compare the translations – and notice the word choices translators make. Even more – I invite you to come to CTS sometime and take Hebrew!

11) For *this commandment*, which I give you today, is not difficult for you, nor is it unreachable. 12) *This commandment* is not in the heavens so that you could say, "Who will go up to the heavens for us, to bring it to us, and make us hear it, and make us do it?" 13) Nor is *this commandment* beyond the sea so that you could say, "Who will cross beyond the sea for us to bring it to us, and make us hear it, and make us do it?" 14) The word is actually near you, very much so. It is in your mouth, in your heart, for you to do it. 15) See, I have placed before your face today life and good, death and evil, 16) in that I command to you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in God's ways, to keep God's commandments, statutes, and judgments. And you will live and you will be many. The Lord, your God, will bless you in the land into which you are coming. 17) But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, and go astray, and worship other gods, and serve them, 18) I declare to you all today that you will surely perish. You will not prolong your days over the land for which you are crossing the Jordan, to come and own it. 19) Today I call the heavens and earth as witness toward you—that I have placed before your face life and death, blessing and curse. So—choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring-- 20) that is, to love the Lord your

God, to hear God's voice, and to cling to God, for God is your life and the length of your days, and dwell in the land that the Lord your God promised to give to your ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebecca, to Jacob and Leah.

What is the "this commandment" to which this text is referring. It refers to THE primary commandment in the scriptures – it is the commandment given by God. "This commandment is not in the heavens...nor is this commandment in the seas" – The "This commandment" refers to the Shema – Deuteronomy 6 – you know it - 4) Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, God alone. 5) You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your being and with all your strength. The people of Israel faced many changes – continual changes. Much of the book of Deuteronomy places on Moses' mouth exhortations for the people – helping them get a grasp of what they must do – how they must be in relationship to God and each other. Moses knows the people must make choices in the face of continual change. According to our Deuteronomy 30 text today - Moses is encouraging the people to grow in God.

Choose Life! Choose Life! How do we respond? We choose life! But the real question is – how do we choose life?!

Some would have us believe making the "right" choice is easy – right? There really is *no choice* involved here. *They* would say there is one clear path – and that is – do what *I* say. Do this – follow a list of regulations – and God will bless you – and you will prosper. Do you know this argument? I wish it could be true but....it is not. BUT- Isn't that kinda what today's text is saying – look at v. 15-16 – See, I have placed before your face today life and good, death and evil, in that I command to you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in God's ways, to keep God's commandments, statutes, and judgments. So – perhaps—following a list of regulations constitutes choosing life – maybe - if life was static and truth was clearly definable by human standards – but in fact – just when we *have* it – we don't *have* it anymore. And lists of regulations are problematic because – whose rules are we talking about? Most often – the rules of the world – or even the world's interpretation – I mean – interpretations - of God's commandments – turn out to be merely human / institutional attempts to control – in favor of our own narcissism. Instead of following God's commandments – when we create that rule list—what we are really trying to do is – we are trying to regulate God. And anyway - Really – we are not talking about a list of rules and regulations – but – this commandment – You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with your whole self, with all your strength.

Moses makes it plain - Placed before the people of God is life and death – we must choose. So—choose life! The choice is ours. We must respond. We DO respond. In the face of our lives (individual and collective) that continually change – we must constantly make choices. It is not what happens to us that matters – it is how we respond. How do we respond? How do you respond? What choice should you make? What choices/options do we have? Besides following some cooked up list of rules – our "option" 1 – that is out. What are the other options?

You know – sometimes when faced with change - Sometimes you just don't want to respond. You want to retreat. Maybe you are tired – weary. Maybe you'd just rather not have to make a choice right now. So sometimes you just try to appear small – try to pretend your choice is insignificant. Why not just let things be? We are worn out. It is just easier to retreat - we choose safety. But in doing so, we become individuals and communities of our own desires. And a further complication of retreating can be seen in its ripple effects - Can we sometimes get by with it? Yes - but – who is it that can get by with not making an apparent choice? Doing so is much easier from a position of privilege and power – right? If the system benefits you – gives you an advantage (real or perceived) – why should you make a choice? But retreating – doing nothing - choosing safety – is a choice to *exist* instead of live – we may not be choosing the worst life – but neither are we choosing the best life – retreat leads to mediocrity, fear of failure, rejection, defeat, the lessening of vitality (for ourselves and for others). We are limited by fear in our quest for safety. And – anyway – retreating – making no choice is not really making no choice. Not choosing is a choice – no response is a response.

So – one option (which really is not an option) is retreat. But that is not the only option in the face of continual change that necessarily brings choices. One somewhat natural and easy option for a response is to *repeat* what we've done before. We respond out of habit. Life comes at us and – because we don't recognize the continual change – or because- whatever – we do what we've always done. But – you know – what they say is true - if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got. We can get stuck. Making a new response out of old patterns is difficult. I remember reading a book at a change point in my life – *Dance of Intimacy* – or maybe *Dance of Anger* – the book talks about moving outside entrenched triangulations in family systems. It describes how you establish patterns and actions in relationships – even if they are enmeshed and dysfunctional – we remain in them – there is some comfort in predicting your pain – at least you know what will happen. So – if one person in the triangle decides – for example – to create healthy boundaries – be the changer - that person disrupts the pattern – the other people in the pattern will accelerate their “trigger” behaviors to try to get the changer back in line. I remember from the book - the suggestion that the changer just must consistently maintain the chosen new action – and eventually the others in the triangle will adapt. It works – I can give testimony! But the point is - Change is difficult – and so sometimes it is easier just to remain the same. Even with good intentions and even with excellence of knowledge – we can repeat poor choices – or we can repeat previous choices that become poor in the face of continual change.

SO - Retreating does not necessarily work. And - Repeating does not necessarily work – at least – neither retreat nor repeat are the most life-giving responses. Choosing how to respond - is complicated – and hard – why does it have to be so hard.? Well – maybe – it is **both** hard – **and** not hard. - 11) For this commandment, which I give you today, is not difficult for you, nor is it unreachable. 12) This commandment is not in the heavens so that you could say, "Who will go up to the heavens for us, to bring it to us, and make us hear it, and

make us do it?" 13) Nor is this commandment beyond the sea so that you could say, "Who will cross beyond the sea for us to bring it to us to us, and make us hear it, and make us do it?" 14) The word is actually near you, very much so. It is in your mouth, in your heart, for you to do it... I have placed before your face life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life! Maybe the way to choose life is not so hard – maybe it is just a little scary. There is another option for response in the face of continual change. We already know there are problems with the other options - Self-constructed lists of regulations are easier. The mediocre safety of retreat is easier. The mundanity of repeating previous choices is easier – but those are insufficient.

The option that works – the choosing of life in response to continual change is this – in each change, we choose recreation of life - recreate life given your current knowledge and understanding based on your experience and context. I see this exact choice in your vision statement – recreating life. Recreating life within each and every moment – celebrating God in you and through you and by you. The life is in you – yearning to come out - to be fully as God has created you to be -- it is actually near you, very much so. It is in your mouth, in your heart, for you to do it." Recreate life given your current knowledge and understanding out of your experience and your context. Not once – but continually. The response for choosing life is to BE ALIVE – to live fully – with all that you are – your thinking, your doing, and your being – your whole self – individually – and as a community of faith. Living lives of continual change – we choose life – we live continually in recreation – recreation of our lives and recreation of our world. It is not hard – it is actually near you, very much so. It is in your mouth, in your heart, for you to do it.

Be alive – when change comes – and it will – it always does - continually – be alive – live fully – don't regulate – don't retreat – don't repeat – recreate out of yourself according to your knowledge, experience, and context. How does this show up in your life? The base question is this – what in your life truly looks different because of your connection to God? And I'm not talking about occasional actions – like – you went to church on Sunday—I'm talking about the totality of you – your whole self – the prompting of your being – the what moves you – the why and how of your whole self? What in your life truly looks different because of your connection to God? What is being recreated in you every moment? Every day? What are you recreating? How are you recreating? How are you responding to the continual changes of life? I love how Morris West says it in his novel, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, "It takes so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage to pay the price. One has to abandon altogether the search for security and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to total acceptance of living and dying."

To choose life – we step in with both feet and both arms and our whole body, mind, heart – the totality of our beings – it is what it is – we engage – and fully.

But there's more – and I know it is cheap to use alliteration – and I was horrified at myself in the development of this sermon – but – it is what it is – the alliteration IS the message of the sermon – it IS up to us to choose how to respond to the continual changes in our lives – retreat OR repeat OR recreate. But - let's play with this word just a bit more. Recreation is recreation. The choice is both hard and easy – recreation – recreation. Play – experience god in you and through you. When we fully engage – we pour ourselves out – we play - in our relationships, in our work, in our living. We play in our work when we live fully into God – and live fully the God in us. Same for our relationships. We play – we recreate – when we live fully into God – and live fully the God in us. Choose Life - it is not hard – it is actually near you, very much so. It is in your mouth, in your heart, for you to do it. It is IN YOU NOW – Choose life. A Change is gonna come – and we can – we must – choose life!

Please come to Chicago Theological Seminary sometime for a visit—or as a student! Check us out at www.ctschicago.edu. And if you'd like to help support a student by giving some money for scholarships, please go to <http://ctschicago.edu/index.php/mnualumns/make-a-gift/173-donation-form> or call Rev. April Lewton at 773-322-0224.

I enjoyed my time with First United Oak Park!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'April Lewton', written in a cursive style.