

“The World Ahead: Flexibility and Openness”  
Philippians 4:12-14

As we look at the world ahead, we know that we have to continue to be flexible and open to change. Yet, we also know that most of us resist or struggle with change. Todd Bolsinger says (screen), “People don’t resist change, they resist loss.” Change often requires loss of what we know and what is comfortable, predictable, and seemingly safe. Loss requires attentiveness to our pain which is in itself very uncomfortable. Yet, without change and openness to new possibilities, we would miss out on so many of the opportunities ahead of us. Think if Jesus played it safe and stayed in his family business instead of becoming a teacher! As William Sloane Coffin put it (screen), “Had Jesus heeded both his parents and the religious authorities of his day, instead of saving the world he would have become the best carpenter in Nazareth.”

Here is a funny video called Idea Killers which is a funny depiction of how people often resist change and new ideas. Idea Killers (show video).

On the surface, it is about not wanting to change, but deep down it is about our fear of the unknown and our discomfort with loss. So how do we stay flexible and open into the future? How do we find contentment even when life may be chaotic or uncertain?

We turn today to a biblical character who learned how to stay open and flexible for the sake of the kingdom of God while finding true contentment. The Apostle Paul gives us a great example. Before his transformation, he was a rigid man. He fought to protect the status quo and what he believed to be the only way to be Jewish and faithful. But after his mystical encounter with Christ, Paul learned to be flexible and open to God’s leading. Here are his words to the Philippians in chapter 4 (screen): “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me. 14 In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.”

Paul was writing these words from prison. It is easy to say that change and flexibility are good when life is going well and we are successful, but when change means loss, it is much harder to embrace it. How could Paul, who was a man of considerable power, find peace and joy, even when he found himself in prison? The key to this passage from Paul is in these words (screen), “I have learned.” Paul learned how to find peace in all circumstances. Instead of looking back to the good old days, when he was the one who had power to imprison and persecute people, Paul learned to look within himself to focus on the kingdom of God and the mission of Christ, even in times of scarcity and pain.

I really appreciate that Paul wrote about this experience telling others that it is possible for others to learn living in this state of acceptance, flexibility, and openness when they learn to rely on God’s grace. He never stopped changing, growing, and exploring new ways to fulfill his mission. Every obstacle that came his way became a new opportunity for growth, learning, and expanding the mission of Christ. His life was not conflict free or

always successful, but his contentment came from the deep well of God's love in his heart and nothing was able to take that away from him.

I am reminded of the story of the Panyee Football Club. In 1986 a football team was formed through the vision of some young people who were open to dreaming beyond the limits of their environment. They lived on a little island in the south of Thailand called "Koh Panyee." It's a floating village in the middle of the sea that has not an inch of soil. The kids there loved to watch football but had nowhere to play or practice. But they didn't let that stop them. They challenged the norm and became a great inspiration for new generations on the island. Here is the film: <https://youtu.be/jU4oA3kkAWU>.

Here is the story by Dan Twist from: <https://thesefootballtimes.co/2017/12/15/how-the-1986-world-cup-inspired-panyee-fc-one-of-asias-most-remarkable-clubs/>: "Inspired by the 1986 World Cup, a group of football-hungry children decided that despite obvious limitations - like their entire village being built on stilts - that they would take matters into their own hands, using any sources of wood to build their very own floating pitch.

Ingenuity and an overwhelming sense of resilience have always permeated this small village of Koh Panyee from its origin back in the 18th century where, due to land ownership limitations, the islanders were forced to build the settlement on stilts, which provided easy access for fisherman. This innovation proved to be a catalyst for the village's future success.

With wood, nails, fishing rafts and whatever else is needed to build a floating pitch gathered, the children began construction, working tirelessly after school to complete it despite obvious pessimism from the older members of the village.

The finished article was, well, far from the finished article. With jagged bits of wood, nails penetrating the surface and no barrier between floating pitch and sea... It didn't stop this resilient group of children; instead, they used it to their advantage, seeing it as an opportunity to improve their ball control.

One day a poster came through from mainland Thailand promoting the Pangha Cup, a football tournament which anyone could enter. Reserved about their ability, the group decided to enter it anyway.

Preparing to leave the village, the children were nervous about the tournament, but a surprise arrival from fellow villagers bearing sporting attire brought increased optimism for the upcoming tournament. It was a welcome surprise to the children who were unaware that the villagers had even been watching them. All kitted up, the team travelled by boat to the tournament with an increased sense of optimism as fellow villagers followed helping to settle unwanted nerves.

It soon became apparent that they were much better than they had anticipated. Encouraged by the increased size of the goals, they were able to make it all the way to the semi-finals. Unfortunately, it rained heavily on the day of the semis, which made it

incredibly hard to run. Drenched in rain and disappointment, Panyee came in at half-time 2-0 down. Something had to change.

Again, with no regards for their health and safety, they decided that the best method of recovery was to go barefoot, meaning their sodden shoes could no longer hold them back. This proved to be a tactical piece of genius that even José Mourinho would be proud of as they soon found themselves on level terms. Unfortunately, in the last minute of the game, the opposition snatched the victory.

Despite an agonising defeat, the team and their crowd of fans cheered in delight of their achievements. They even managed to pick themselves up and were able to come away with third place in the consolation match.

Their decision to build this floating pitch proved to be their literal and figurative platform for future success, currently acknowledged as one of southern Thailand's greatest youth teams. Helping to inspire future generations of Panyee, the club has gone on to win many regional championships, including seven consecutively from 2004 to 2010, which are detailed in the video."

This is a great story of creativity based on openness to new ideas and visions. But the key was for the children to be flexible and willing to change. The same is true of our spiritual journey. Staying open is key to our spiritual growth and faithfulness. God is always doing new things and we have to be willing to explore them, even if we stumble along the way. One of the spiritual practices is called (screen) "Breath Prayer." It is a beautiful and powerful reminder about the importance of emptying ourselves to make room for the Spirit of God to renew us. The breathing cycle is a great way to help us physically practice a sense of opening and then receiving new life. We are going to practice the breath prayer together. On the inhale, the invitation is to allow yourself to be open to God by saying within your spirit, "I open to you." On the exhale, you may say, "I release control." Repeat this several times slowly. Let us close with this prayer adapted from Joyce Rupp, "Jesus, you know what it is like to be totally emptied. Teach me the value of emptiness. Help me to not be frightened when change needs to happen. Come with your strength, your peace, your hope. Stand with me in my emptying times so that I will remain open and ready to grow." Amen.