



An Instruction for All Time
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sunday, September 1st, 2019
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
Dr. Anni Krummel~Reinking

You might think some things never change, but change is inevitable, even with ideas that we learned are stagnant-- like measurements or weights. While we may think a pound is a pound, an ounce is an ounce and a kilogram is a kilogram. We would actually be wrong. Only months ago, the kilogram was redefined using a different standard.

Measurement may not sound like a topic needing a lot of study, but some scientists do exactly that, and those scientists are called metrologists — from the Greek metron which means “measure.” Their work is important.

For example, some metrologists work at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), a federal agency within the U.S. Department of Commerce. Its mission is “to promote U.S. innovation and industrial competitiveness by advancing measurement science, standards and technology in ways that enhance economic security and improve our quality of life.”

So what do metrologists do to mark a landmark step forward, a change, in their field of study?

At least some of them got a themed tattoo.

That’s what six researchers at NIST did late last year after a vote in Versailles, France, where representatives from the United States and 59 other nations voted to change the definition of the kilogram and three other units of measurement from the existing standards or definitions to what they call “the fundamental constants of nature.”

In the case of the kilogram, a unit of mass, the standard is no longer a physical cylinder known as Le Grand K that’s stored in a vault outside of Paris. It’s now defined in terms of an unvarying number at the heart of quantum physics.

If you don’t understand that, no worries. Only a few do. But metrologists consider this an earth-moving change, since the Le Grand K, as a physical object was subject to variance. In 2007, for example, after being the standard for 118 years, the Le Grand K was found to have lost about 50 micrograms. The new standard that was chosen is constant and immutable.

Some are calling these revisions the most important changes the International Bureau of Weights and Measures has made in 100 years.

And that's why those six metrological workers got themed tattoos. There's a picture of them online, posed together smiling, all with their tattooed arms extended, and all looking slightly silly because they're wearing the gauzy hair nets required for their work. "It's about as excited as you're going to see metrologists get," said David Newell, a researcher at NIST.

What does all this mean in the daily life of the average person? Not much. A kilogram is still roughly equivalent to 2.2 pounds, but its redefinition will streamline scientific research and development when it involves ultra-precise measurements of mass.

Now you may think I have taken you down a rabbit hole talking about kilograms and the changing measurements of mass, but don't worry I haven't. I've taken you down this rabbit hole not because of any noticeable effect on our lives with the changing definition of a kilogram but because in areas that we do care about, especially religion, we sometimes get tangled up in arguments over what parts of our faith are unchangeable versus what parts are tied to cultural practices of biblical times.

The epistle reading for today gives us an opportunity to think about this, especially as it declares, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." The new constant measure may be immutable, unchangeable. And it may be the standard by which the kilogram is measured. But Jesus Christ is Immutable with a capital I. Jesus Christ is the person who gives immutability meaning.

You might call him the Christ constant.

Now, going down our rabbit hole a little further focusing on measurement, the text for today also includes some other important statements or standards:

Let mutual love continue.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.

Remember those who are in prison.

Let marriage be held in honor by all.

Let the marriage bed be kept undefiled.

Keep your lives free from the love of money.

Be content with what you have.

Remember your leaders ... and imitate their faith.

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have.

Most Christians would likely agree that, at least in principle, those statements, too, refer to practices of our faith that are intended to be unchangeable.

But as to whether every Scriptural instruction is intended to be unchangeable, we get a hint of an answer from the way the verses were cut today as part of the lectionary. Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16. If you noticed, verses 9-14 are omitted. The lectionary sometimes skips verses for clarity or to keep the passage to a reasonable length for reading in worship. But today, verses 9-14 are about rituals and blood sacrifice — issues that were important to the first-century church, however not important to the church today. By omitting these verses, the lectionary seems to be saying that the content of verses 9-14 does not belong in this list of unchangeable practices of our faith.

But that leaves, of course, the standards and measurements that are included. Maintaining these standards or constants will help us to live the right way, a holy way — in ways “that enhance ... and improve our quality of life,” as the researchers of NIST put it.

Still, if spiritual growth means anything, it has to refer to more than just adhering to a list of best practices. Hopefully, as we continue our walk with Christ, we internalize these practices to such a degree that we will spontaneously live by the spirit of the matters on the list.

However, we sometimes fail to do that and that may be especially true regarding the first two instructions on this list:

- 1) Let mutual love continue, and
- 2) do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.

Biblical commentators point out that these first two instructions cover relationships in two directions — that the writer of Hebrews likely intended the first, mutual love, to define our attitude and behavior toward those who are in the faith community with us, and the second, hospitality to strangers, to define our attitude and behavior toward those beyond the faith community.

Both of these are challenging work, and neither is necessarily easy. But to focus here just on the first — the difficulty of mutual love toward those with whom we worship — consider how bitter partisanship can show up in our churches, especially at large gatherings.

Deciding what should be unchangeable and what can move with cultural shifts and new information can make for a lot of discomfort.

So what are we left with?

Earlier this year, at the UMC (United Methodist Church)’s General Conference, William Willimon, a retired United Methodist bishop who now teaches the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School, wrote the following after a vote on LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage in the UMC church:

The question of LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage, insoluble at a corporate-style global gathering of 800 people, is more or less resolved in every congregation I know. The solution may not be one of which I approve, but in a way that somehow works in the present moment for that congregation, in the place where Christ has assembled them, they muddle through. They may still have great differences; they may have lost members because of their solution. There may be repeated, heated arguments. The pastor may be uneasy with and unsure how to lead their work in progress, but they have practiced forbearance because Jesus told them to. They have discovered the adventure of worshiping the Trinity with people with whom they disagree, because, like it or not, those are the folk whom the Lord has convened and made Methodist. They muddle through.

Although most of us sitting here today in this church are not Methodists, Willimon’s description of congregations muddling through describes a reality many of us experience, and not just about matters of sexual orientation. There are many troubling aspects of the human condition that come with us to church and about which we need to practice forbearance, patience, toward one another if the church is to have any meaning not only for attendees, but also for those who look at us from the outside.

Remember, the church is a constant. The business of being the church is never a simple matter, and disagreements over how to apply biblical principles to life are inevitable given our human nature. But at the same time, the business of being the church is a vital endeavor.

The church is a constant. It shall prevail. So when the writer of Hebrews says, “Let mutual love continue,” he is stating a timeless warning that helps us as we muddle through as the church continues to do its work in the world. We are followers of Jesus in company with others who may not agree with us on every application of the faith. And that mutual love should remain in force at all times.

Mutual love is a command.

Mutual love is a constant.

It exists within another constant, the church, whose head in turn is another constant, Jesus Christ, “the same yesterday and today and forever.”

This knowledge will help us when muddling through is the only way forward.

“Let mutual love continue.” Now that’s something worth tattooing on your arm, or maybe on your back, such as the tattoo on my back, which is a quote from my grandfather, whom I discovered after his death was a very pensive person. The tattoo states:

“My variety of Christianity is not used to explain everything.

It accepts and appreciates mystery.”

Christian love, mutual love, that kind of love is a love that remains constant, doesn’t try to explain or argue every disagreement, but rather accepts mystery.