

The Great Constant

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Measurement may not sound like a topic needing a lot of study, but some scientists do exactly that, and those who do 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 celebrate a landmark step forward in their field of study? At least some of them get a themed tattoo. That’s what six researchers at NIST did late in 2018 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 (the ampere, kelvin and mole) 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 the Planck constant, an unvarying and infinitesimal 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, the Planck constant is immutable ... unchanging.

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.

I’ve taken you through this physics matrix not because of any noticeable effect on our lives 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 reading from Hebrews 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 Planck constant may be immutable. 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.

Compared to Christ, the words we speak – like most everything else in life – are not as constant as we think they are or wish them to be, as the following illustration shows.

Most of us will flock to church in December, eager to hear the Christmas story. We all know the details: shepherds, angels, wise men, “the little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay.” That’s the Christmas story we seek – the beloved story related by the gospel-writers – but it’s not the Christmas story God told. The Almighty may have dispatched the heavenly host to announce, “To you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord,” but that’s not the language God used.

You must look to the opening lines of the Letter to the Hebrews for that: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son ...” At its most basic level, the Word – the logos – of God is not words at all. It’s the Word, the living Word, Jesus Christ.

Over the generations, words of every human language come and go. They arise like the sun, shine forth at their zenith, then slip below the dark horizon when their work is done. But the greatest Word, the God-spoken Word, never changes. That word is Jesus himself, who is eternal. He is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8).

But today’s text also includes some other important statements or standards, including these: 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 likely would agree that, at least in principle, these statements, too, refer to practices of our faith that are intended to be constant ... unchangeable. But as to whether every Scriptural instruction is intended to be immutable, we get a hint of an answer from the way the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) omits verses 9-14 from today’s reading of Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16.

The lectionary sometimes skips verses just for clarity or to keep the passage to a reasonable length for reading in worship. Verses 9-14, however, are about rituals and blood sacrifice – issues that were important to the first-century church but not so much to the twenty-first century church. So, by omitting these verses, the RCL seems to be saying that the content of verses 9-14 doesn’t belong in this list of unchangeable practices of our faith.

But that leaves, of course, the standards and measurements that are included in today’s text that I just read. 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 NIST puts it. Still, if spiritual growth means anything, it must 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.

We sometimes fail to do that, however, 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 are challenging work, and neither is necessarily easy. But to focus here just on the first – the difficulty of mutual love toward those within our church community and with whom we worship – consider how bitter partisanship can show up in our churches, especially at large plenary gatherings like TUMC’s quadrennial General Conferences. Deciding what should be unchangeable and what can be changed with cultural shifts and new information can make for a lot of contention and distress.

So, what are we left with? Following TUMC’s Special Session of General Conference in 2019, (the 2020 GC is postponed until 2024 due to Covid-19) William Willimon, a retired United Methodist bishop who teaches the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School, wrote this in *The Christian Century* magazine:

“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.”

Whether we are United Methodists or members of another Christian denomination, 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 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.

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.

All this is to say that Christ’s Church – like Christ himself – is a constant. It shall prevail. So, when the writer of Hebrews says, “Let mutual love continue,” he is stating a timeless admonition that helps us as we “muddle through” as the church, continuing to do its work in the world. We are followers of the Christ Constant in company with others who may not agree with us on every aspect of religion and faith. And that mutual love should remain in force even if a time comes when our disagreements are so strong that a denomination or congregation decides to split or disaffiliate.

Consider what happened in The United Methodist Special Session of General Conference in February of 2019 in St. Louis. The UMC was trying to find a “way forward” over the disagreement about LGBTQ people serving in its clergy ranks and whether its pastors could officiate at same-sex weddings.

The conservative wing prevailed which means neither of those things should be allowed. Before the vote, both sides made impassioned pleas. It soon became clear, however, that people were hardened into their positions, and apparently nobody was swayed by the arguments of the other side.

Mutual love, which is not a mushy feeling but a sense of respect and regard for those who share the Christian way with us, was hard to find among the gathered community of faith that is (supposed to be) Christ’s Constant Church. What a shame!

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." I pray this understanding of the "great constant" will help us be the church God calls us to be - loving one another and offering hospitality to all - especially when it seems muddling through is the only way forward.

"Let mutual love continue." Now that's a "great constant" worth tattooing on your arm - and expressing in all your relationships with persons (both neighbors and strangers alike) who are traveling with you on the "great journey" of life and surrounded by a "great cloud" of witnesses (both living and dead). Oh, and if any of you decide to get "let mutual love continue" tattooed on your arm: First, don't say "My pastor told me to." And second, let me see it!