
St. Aidan's Sermons

Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Rev. Canon Dr. Brett Cane, January 29, 2012

Epiphany 4; 8:30 and 10:00 a.m. Holy Communion

“God at Work in the Midst of Change” **2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 1:9-15**

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you are the same yesterday, today and forever; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to embrace the challenges and opportunities of the changes coming in our lives that we might experience the transforming power of that same Spirit in order to live out our calling as your Body to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Introduction

I don't find change easy to handle – I never have, and as I am getting older, I find it even less so! And now as a church and for myself, we are entering a season of change. The anticipation of change can make us sad, angry, anxious, and fearful. We wish things could stay the way they were. But we know they can not. But don't be afraid of change as automatically bad - it can actually be a good thing!

This morning, I want to show you why change can be a good thing. More than that, I want to show you where God fits in the midst of change. As things are in a state of flux all around us we might feel he is absent – but that is not true; in fact, I hope to show you that God works most powerfully in the midst of change! This is the subject of my final sermon to you as your rector because I want to open up to you the opportunities of the challenging but exciting days ahead as you move into a new season of the Spirit here at St. Aidan's. We are going to look first, at change and the Gospel, then the value of change, and finally the challenges and opportunities of change.

Change and the Gospel

a. Change at the heart of the Gospel: It is interesting that the first recorded teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark has to do with change: “The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Repentance (metanoia) means “to turn back,” “return.” It contains within it the sense that God calls us to change by turning from our self-centred ways to go his way. Change is at the heart of the Gospel as Jesus later affirms, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). The assertion of the Gospel is that, in our present state of separation from God, we are “dead in our transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1); we need to be “made alive with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4) – we need to be changed. Transformation and change are to characterize our relationship with God: “We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18). This transformation and change is, as the epistles show, for both individuals and congregations, a continuous process. We are “to grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). Growth implies change and this process does not finish in this life until we hear the last trumpet which, when it sounds, “the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52). Change is at the heart of the Gospel!

b. Changelessness at the heart of the Gospel: At the same time that we are undergoing a process of continuous change, there is One who does not change. Referring to change in the created order, the writer to the Hebrews quotes the Psalms affirming God's changelessness: "You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (Hebrews 1:12). The writer adds later, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). This is what enables you and I as individual Christians and we as a congregation to carry on in the midst of the unsettling and often chaotic nature of change and even to thrive under it. "We serve a sovereign God who is unchanging and unchangeable. There is nothing chaotic about him."¹ Stephen Covey has pointed out that "People can't live with change if there is not a changeless core inside them. The key to the ability to change is a changeless sense of who you are, what you are about and what you value."² This assurance of knowing we are known by God, of being rooted in the centre of all there is, allows us then to be open to change where necessary in terms of mission and ministry. Because our security is in God, we do not need to rest our identities in how we have always done things or the institution of the Church or its ministry. Change and changelessness are both at the heart of the Gospel. On these two foundations of change and changelessness, let us now look at the value of change.

The Value of Change

Living "on the margins": In looking at the value of change, especially for the church, I have been particularly helped by a little book by a Canadian pastor, Al Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality*.³ Now, the title sounds very technical but his chief point is not – it is very down-to-earth! "Liminality" means "being on the margins" – at the edge of things. He points out that the church, which used to be at the centre of society, now finds itself pushed out to the edges – nobody cares too much about what we say or think any more. Now we might think that this is bad thing – he shows that it is a good thing.

To do this, he uses the picture of what happens in rites of passage from childhood to adulthood in many pre-industrial cultures. A young person is sent off into the wilderness with limited resources and while in this marginal or "liminal" state is to accomplish certain feats, to survive and grow through the experience and to return and re-enter society as an adult. During this "liminal" state, there is an initial period of confusion and vulnerability with the sense of being an "outsider." You want to return to your familiar situation, but you can't – you have to move forward and change to develop a new identity and sense of purpose.

Roxburgh points out that this is what is happening to the church. Pushed to the edges of today's society, we have lost our identity and have become "outsiders." We want to return to the way things were but we can't. But there is light at the end of the tunnel! The value of being on the margins means that we have a great opportunity to reassess who we are in Christ and his call on us as individuals and a church. On the margins, we are challenged to throw aside compromises with non-Biblical ways of doing things that have hindered our nature, mission and ministry in recent times. There is much vulnerability and anxiety in this process but there is also much promise for transformation and becoming more the kind of church and people God wants us to be.

Old Testament examples of being on the margins: Scripture abounds with examples of spiritual growth or benefits for future generations that resulted from God's people undergoing changes while living on the margins. The journey of Abraham and his family from Ur to Canaan and the experiences of the early patriarchs from Genesis as nomads on the fringes of settled pagan society are the first examples of this. The Joseph stories (Genesis 50:20) are full of pain brought about through extreme change and marginalization which is used by God to great advantage in the history of salvation. Moses' time of expulsion from Egyptian society and functioning as shepherd in the wilderness of Sinai was the opportunity for the reforming of his character and equipping as leader for God's people. The Exodus wanderings were a time of living on the extreme margins for the children of Israel, with no country to call their own and under social, religious, and militantly threat. And yet it is during this time that God revealed his character as the saviour of the nation and gave his law which was to form Israel into a culture which would be a vehicle of blessing to all nations. The experiences of Elijah as a

¹ Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1990), 186.

² Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1989), pg. 108.

³ Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

marginalized prophet under Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 17-19) and those of the later prophets are all examples of God speaking to and through people who were “on the margins.” Then, it was while in exile in Babylon, experiencing marginalization as a conquered race, that God’s people finally learned his holiness and universality and understood their call as a missionary people.

Jesus and the Church on the Margins: Moving on to the New Testament, we have the experience of Jesus himself during his temptations in the desert following his baptism that we heard about in the gospel reading. This was an intense time of liminality for him during which he set the pattern for dealing with the temptations he was to face throughout his ministry to abandon his God-given mission and the suffering that would entail. Then, the ultimate example of being on the margins was the cross where Jesus became a curse for us, being excluded from the human race, in order “to redeem us from the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:13). This exclusion and marginalization is graphically described to the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews who were in danger of losing their salvation because they wanted to avoid the marginalization they were experiencing and return to the mainstream of Jewish religious society:

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. (Hebrews 13:11-14).

The epistles and the book of Revelation assume the context of congregations on the margins which was to be the pattern of the persecuted Church during which time there was such tremendous growth. Throughout church history the life of God’s people has often been found on the margins and it is there in the midst of “liminality” and change that crucial spiritual victories and advances have taken place. It seems that God uses times of change and marginalization to purify his people and prepare them for new things. I think the relevance of this reality to the situations of change ahead of us is obvious. What does God have in mind for you and me as we go through this time of change ahead?

The Challenges and Opportunities of Change

God uses change to place before us challenges and opportunities. Leith Anderson, in his book “Dying for Change” uses the term “the Neutral Zone” to describe living on the margins and summarizes the challenges and opportunities of change as follows:

The Neutral Zone is a period of reorientation, an “in-between time” that is often unstable and uncertain. We feel disconnected. We have neither the comfortable familiarity of the old nor the fresh assurance of the new...However, when rightly understood, the neutral zone becomes positive – an opportunity to celebrate and grieve the past without rushing into permanent commitments for the future. This is when new ideas can be considered and new directions explored.⁴

This is the purpose of the interim period ahead for you as a parish. Here are some challenges and opportunities for you in this time of change - sometimes the challenge and opportunity are two sides of the same coin.

1. Let Go: The first challenge is to let go. Letting-go is a major theme of the Gospel. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:34-35). God may be calling you to let go of aspects of your experience and expectations of what the church is and should be for a new vision of what he has for you. Things have been good these past ten years – but God may have a new direction for you for the next ten. Another way of looking at this is to let go of your strengths so that you can depend more upon God to show you new ways of moving ahead in the future. We heard earlier Paul’s affirmation that “(God’s) power is made perfect in weakness...when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Oz Guinness describes this as the paradox surrounding success: “On the one hand, in matters of the spirit, nothing fails like success. On the other hand, in matters of the spirit, nothing succeeds like failure.”⁵ Look back to the Biblical record and history of the church we spoke of earlier – it was only when the people of God were on the margins and chastised that they became open to God’s working amongst them.

⁴ Anderson, *Dying for Change*, pg. 206.

⁵ Oz Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), pg. 89.

Therefore, the letting-go, the dying to self, will also involve repentance: how much have we loved our traditions more than God; how much have we loved our institutions more than people? Ask forgiveness for hanging on to the familiar instead of being open to the new things God may want to do amongst you. Look to God to take you in new directions. Be willing to let go.

2. Step out in faith: Secondly, be willing to step out in faith. Leith Anderson points out that, because the Church is a naturally conservative body, we reward faithfulness, not changeableness.⁶ We are not inclined to take risks. Twenty centuries of tradition, older leadership, the need to faithfully transmit our heritage, and natural inertia, all militate against taking the risk of change. But this faithfulness to what we have received must be matched by faithfulness in obeying the Spirit now. Stepping out in faith is at the heart of the Gospel as we have seen, beginning with Abraham's obedience to move his home and his later risking his son's life, to the simple step of commitment by today's child challenged to "make Jesus his or her special friend." There is the cost that "we should no longer live for ourselves but for him who died for us and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:15). At our "Listening to God" conference last Fall, Stewart Wakeman told us of Rick Warren's analogy that faith is the experience of having left the first trapeze before the new trapeze has arrived!⁷ This requires an increased dependency on God to trust him in uncertainty. Take risks and step out in faith. This is both a challenge and an opportunity.

3. Practice community: The next opportunity (and challenge) is to practice community. This was the term Stewart used in his talk last Fall. It is the theme of my final "Dear Friends" letter in "The Window." One of the things I spoke about when I first arrived was the importance of the church as both the agent and demonstration of God's plan to reconcile the world in Christ. It is in the church and through our relationships with one another where we first see worked out the salvation we have received – through loving relationships. Here is a great opportunity to move away from the merely privatized version of faith that we have inherited from our culture to the more corporate experience we see in the Scriptures. Many feel that an interim time is when people begin to fall away from the parish – "Things are not the same; I'm not getting what I need. I'll move on." This is the opposite of what should occur. This is the opportunity to grow in community, for new voices to be heard and for new leadership to develop as new challenges are faced. Here again are my three practical ways you can demonstrate love for one another and the reality of community in the months ahead:

1. **Come to worship:** In the last interim, attendance dropped by over a third! Part of our commitment to one another is showing up on Sundays! Please do not underestimate the importance of your presence at worship. Your presence is an encouragement to others – to say nothing of the value to yourself and the Lord! (plus, you don't want miss out on what God is doing!) Show your love for one another by showing up!
2. **Continue to give:** It is easy for parish giving to drop off in an interim period and this is a source of great anxiety to those in leadership – remove this anxiety by giving even more! Costs will rise (e.g. travel costs for prospective candidates, moving expenses, etc.) during the Interim, so pray about whether your giving should be increased. Show your love for one another by giving generously.
3. **Meet together:** One area of parish life where St. Aidan's needs strengthening is small groups for fellowship, learning, prayer and pastoral care. The ideal is for every parishioner to be involved in some form of small group because this is the best place for primary pastoral care to be exercised and where love can be shown in practical ways, spiritual gifts exercised and leadership skills developed. Show your love for one another by meeting together.

These are three ways to practice community which is especially vital in a time of change.

Conclusion

Change is at the heart of the Gospel and creates challenges and opportunities for you to grow as a parish and individuals. As you experience "living on the margins" in the next few months, may you experience in brand new ways the presence and power of the One who lived on the margins for us to make us a people for himself, sanctified by the Spirit to the glory of God the Father.

⁶ Anderson, *Dying for Change*, 117.

⁷ Rick Warren, "Leadership Lifter – How to Take Wise Risks as a Leader – part 2" found on <http://smallgroupnetwork.wordpress.com/2010/10/30/leadership-lifter-how-to-take-wise-risks-as-a-leader-part-2/>