



Challenging the Status Quo



A Sermon By
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July 5, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

Ezekiel 2:1-5
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

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The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
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May I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Liberator, and Change Agent. Amen.

“God bless America, land that I love. Stand beside her, and guide her thru the night with a light from above. From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans, white with foam, God bless America, my home sweet home.” Yesterday, I joined countless other patriots in singing this song on the National Mall. The words have never rung quite so true for me as they did this time, eight days after the Supreme Court ruled that I, as a lesbian woman, can legally marry the person I love anywhere in this country and receive the same benefits and legal standing as my heterosexual brothers and sisters. This is a significant shift and I feel it in my very bones.

This shift is not only happening on the legal stage, change is happening on the religious front too. The Supreme Court’s ruling in favor of marriage equality is helping to redefine our national understanding of marriage. While marriage is legally open to both opposite and same sex couples, individual religious traditions still have the ability to marry or deny marriage to couples as they choose. This Wednesday, at its General Convention, the Episcopal Church decided that same sex couples have the right to marry in Episcopal Churches throughout the nation. The Church also voted to change its current definition of marriage in its canons from simply, “between a man and a woman” to more inclusive and broader language. Times are changing!

This change brings me great joy and the satisfaction of belonging. I feel that my very personhood is valued more than it was two weeks ago. While I knew two weeks ago that I mattered to many people and was loved and valued by many people, the shift I felt when I learned about the Supreme Court ruling made me feel valued in a way I have never experienced. The change to the marriage rites of the church are icing on the cake. What a joyous eight days! However, I would be remiss to think that every American shares my joy at these recent changes. Many do, but many do not.

Some people welcome this change, but at the same time, it is a painful reminder that their personal struggle for equality continues. Others do not welcome the change at all. It goes against tradition and the status quo, both of which are powerful realities. When something that is familiar to us, and something which we value, is questioned, challenged, or altered, we in turn may feel threatened or defensive. In times like this, defensiveness can illicit reactionary responses. Our national history is riddled with reactionary responses to perceived threats, even today. Just look at the recent series of church burnings throughout the South. These church burnings come in the wake of conversations about removing the Confederate battle flag and the struggle to eradicate the racist culture it represents from our collective consciousness. This is probably not coincidental timing, but rather a reaction to the threat of change. Change, and the

perceived threat that accompanies it, often leaves people feeling adrift, defensive, and reactionary. Threats to the status quo are often perceived as dangerous.

We see this in our Gospel narrative today. In this account, Jesus returns to his hometown for the first time since beginning his public ministry. It should be a joyous occasion. The hometown boy returns after making a name for himself. One would think those who knew him best would welcome Jesus with open arms, and yet, the response he receives from his neighbors is anything but open. In fact, Jesus' teachings are received with offense and contempt.

But then, Jesus no longer met the status quo his neighbors had of him. He wasn't simply the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon anymore. Jesus still was that person, but he was also more. Jesus was filled with wisdom and deeds of power. The person Jesus had become had blossomed beyond the limited understanding that his neighbors had of him. And they took offense at this change. Jesus in turn was amazed at their disbelief. He was amazed at their reaction to the perceived threat he posed to them simply by being different than they remembered and by offering them an opportunity to be different too.

Today in 2015, we're not so different from Jesus' neighbors from Nazareth. The threat of change is just as real in 2015 as it was then. How will we choose to react when confronted with change? At the national level? How about at the social level? The personal level? Will we join Jesus' neighbors and shun the changes we see? Or is there another way to respond? Of course there is and we see what that response looks like in the second half of our gospel narrative.

After his rejection at Nazareth, Jesus continues to visit local villages where he teaches, heals, and proclaims God's kingdom. He then does something we hear about for the first time. Jesus splits his followers up and sends them out in pairs to share as participants in his ministry of teaching, proclaiming, and healing. Jesus gives his followers specific instructions, that, should they be met with intolerance or rejection because of the change they proclaim, they should leave and continue to proclaim the reign of God's change to whoever else may hear and listen.

Change is difficult. It can be frightening. It can make us feel disjointed and uncomfortable. And yet God calls us to embrace the prophetic changes of God's reign. We know that God's reign is one of justice, compassion, and reconciliation. The realities of what that reign looks and feels and sounds like are very different than what we are accustomed to. God's reign replaces intolerance with acceptance, hatred with understanding. God's reign encourages us to break the silence of our complacency, the silence of half-truths and mistrust. The silence of fear. Civil Rights activist Audre Lorde, writes, "...for it is not difference that immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken." In our gospel account today, Jesus breaks the silence of complacency with the status quo and commissions his followers to do likewise. May we, like them, be agents of change and heralds of the gospel in our world, which so desperately needs its message of hope and promise of God's justice. Amen.