

*Let us pray:*

Gracious and Holy Father, give us wisdom to perceive you  
 Intelligence to understand you,  
 Diligence to seek you,  
 Patience to wait for you,  
 Eyes to behold you,  
 A heart to meditate upon you,  
 And a life to proclaim you  
 Through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
 Amen.<sup>1</sup>

*Give me your tired, your  
 poor,  
 Your huddled masses  
 yearning to breathe free,  
 The wretched refuse of your  
 teeming shore.  
 Send these — the homeless,  
 tempest-tossed — to me;  
 I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door.*



Emma Lazarus wrote these words. They are inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. They are a symbol of what this country represented to the world when it was founded.

During the years that immigrants were processed at Ellis Island, the Statue loomed large- a sign that the transition from the “old country” to the new was occurring in an immigrant’s life. The immigrant had left behind all that was familiar in order to create a new life in the United States. The dream of a life where there were, and are, freedoms often unimaginable in other places. Opportunities to be more than is possible in other places where too often you are limited in what you can do and where you can go.

This Sunday following the celebrations of July 4<sup>th</sup> Independence Day is a good time to reflect upon our life together as St. John’s. Where have we been willing to take a risk for a dream of witnessing to the love of God in Christ? Where do we need to be willing to take a risk for the realm of God to come closer to earth?

The 3 “BHAG”<sup>2</sup> meetings we had earlier this year asked us to discern where we would like to see St. John’s in 50 years and how we might make those dreams become reality. What changes do we need to make now to make those dreams come true in the future? This is not change simply to make a change but rather changes to move God’s realm closer to earth.

Part of changing is risking that we will not be understood. That is something that seems to happen within the Episcopal Church fairly often. We follow what we believe God is calling us to

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<sup>1</sup> A prayer by St. Benedict.

<sup>2</sup> BHAG = Big, huge, audacious goals.

be and do and the wider world looks askance at us. What are those crazy Episcopalians doing now?, they ask.

David Lose, a Lutheran theologian, offers some insights into our dilemma. He writes: “Our life in this world is marked by a profound desire to be understood, to be known, to be accepted, and yet so much of life is colored by being misunderstood and feeling like we are neither known nor accepted for who we really are.”<sup>3</sup>

“To be is to be misunderstood. Whatever we call it, I suspect Jesus would have agreed. At the beginning of this chapter [in the Gospel of Matthew], the imprisoned John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether he was the one foretold by prophecy or whether they should look for another. Jesus responded by naming his “deeds of power” – not of conquest but of healing – and then went on to instruct the crowds about John, naming him Elijah, the forerunner of God’s messiah.

“But now the tone of [Jesus’s] message to those gathered turns more ominous. He compares them to a fickle audience who can’t decide what they want. Or perhaps it’s a divided crowd. Either way, nothing seems to please them. When John came with his message of austere repentance, they complained. When Jesus came welcoming all and proclaiming God’s abundant favor, they dismissed him. To be is to be misunderstood.

“*What do you want?* Jesus seems to ask the crowd. Except he knows they won’t answer. Can’t. Because what they want is to grow, to evolve, to improve and more. And yet at the same time they want to be left alone, untouched and unchanged. Why?

Because to change is to lose something, and so to change can feel like dying. And more than anything else the people who listened to Jesus ... want desperately to grow but not really to change.

“Change, you see, brings the unknown. Change is not certain. Change implies risk and even potential loss. Which is why we often stay in failed jobs and relationships – they may not be much, but at least they’re something and at least we know what to expect.

“But here’s the difficult truth about life in Christ. You cannot enter into it and expect to be unchanged. Which means a precondition of receiving Jesus – perhaps the only one! – is to recognize your need for Jesus. Forgiveness, when you think about it, is meaningful only to those who have sinned, grace avails only those who are broken, and the promise of life abundant and eternal is only attractive to those who know they are dying.

Lose continues: “I think that’s what Jesus is getting at in the prayer our passage turns to a few verses later. He knows that this kind of message – a message that is good news only to those who can identify their need – will be of little appeal to the self-made man or woman of the first or twenty-first centuries. But it is good news – unbelievably good news – to those who know

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<sup>3</sup> David Lose. “...in the meantime” blog post on Pentecost 4A. June 30, 2014. The balance of this sermon draws upon this blog post as indicated by the quotation marks.

their brokenness, can admit their need, and who turn to God in Jesus to be known, understood, and accepted.

“The recent chapters of Matthew’s Gospel have been dominated by stories portraying Jesus encountering and healing all manner of people – lepers, a centurion’s servant, those who are demon-possessed, a mother taken ill who cannot serve, a women who has bled for years, another who is presumed dead. The one thing all these various and sundry characters have in common is their palpable need. True faith, according to the narrative terms of this story, is simply acknowledging that need and trusting Jesus can respond. ...

“Take stock of your lives, giving thanks for what seems good and right, but also admit where there is hurt, pain, loneliness, or disappointment. ... God knows your struggles. God has entered into you in Jesus. God has promised to heal you and make you whole. It doesn’t happen overnight, of course. Sometimes the span of a lifetime is barely enough time to feel God’s healing presence and touch in our lives. But it does happen, and it happens more quickly when we come together again and again to hear the Word of God proclaimed and to receive, touch, and taste the Word of God shared as we gather in Christian fellowship around the sacred meal of bread, wine, grace, and acceptance.

“Jesus’ call is clear: you who are content and satisfied will find little of value here. But you who are weary will find rest,  
 you who feel accused – whether by others or yourself – will find forgiveness,  
 you who feel abandoned will find fellowship,  
 you who feel disappointed will find relief,  
 you who feel hurt will find healing, and  
 you who feel misunderstood will be known, loved, and accepted for whom you are.”

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To follow Jesus is to take a risk on change and transformation. The dream and the reality founded on that dream have a price, however. You have to leave behind your old life and create a new one. This isn’t easy and it often takes more time than you’d like. Saying hello to new possibilities often means saying goodbye to some cherished traditions. The memories are still present though – and should not be set aside even as we move forward into new ways of being.

Our history – individually and collectively- is important. Our history tells us who we have been and lays the groundwork for who we might become. Our history tells us about our values and how we have lived those values. Our history tells us about how we found our way forward when things looked dark and dim.

The life and work of Jesus is all about transition and transformation. Jesus calls the weary and those carrying heavy burdens and offers them rest. He says: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me .... And you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

The catch is that you and I have to acknowledge Jesus as the one who can give us these things.

We have to be willing to reach out and accept the gracious gift. We have to be willing to change. We have to want to change and change because the future we perceive is worth the cost of change. We have to be willing to risk the change because we see what is possible through faith and hope in Jesus.

Jesus commissioned the twelve and gave them authority over unclean spirits and the power to cast them out. He gave the twelve the power to cure every disease and every sickness (Mt. 10:1). Talk about transition and transformation! Ordinary folks, like you and me, called to be disciples of Jesus the Christ. First, they have each left their life and gone to follow Jesus. They have been willing to change- to accept the transition from their life before Jesus- in order to obtain life with Jesus. Jesus has given them power and authority to do awesome things. Casting out demons and curing the sick – bringing rest to the weary and those carrying heavy burdens. Their lives were transformed in marvelous ways because they were willing to follow Jesus.

Even more, Jesus tells the twelve, take no gold, silver or copper in your belts. No bag for your journey and only one tunic (Mt. 10:9-10). Faith in the commissioning by Jesus, **alone**, is sufficient for the work they have been sent to do.

Jesus waits for us to hear his word. And so often we fail to hear it. We are called to dance and we sit and mope. Or we are called to mourn and we ignore the injustices of the world around us (Mt. 11: 16-17). We get so caught up in the nitty-gritty of our daily lives, the weariness of it all, that we forget that we are children of God called to be light to the world.

“Do not be afraid”- the angels and other messengers of God- tell us over and over again not to be afraid. Yes, transition and transformation can be daunting. Yes, who and what St. John’s will be in the future will be somewhat different than it is today. We do not need to be afraid because God is with us in all that we do. We can lay down our burdens and rest in Christ. And that is good news, indeed. *Amen.*