

5 Epiphany C - 7 February 2010  
Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11  
Jim Stockton

God calls people to change. I read a story: Two caterpillars are crawling along on the grass. A butterfly flies by overhead. They both look up, and the one caterpillar nudges the other and says, "You couldn't get me up in one those things for a million dollars." God call people to change things, and to the experience of things being changed.

When Jesus tells Peter to drop his nets into the water he is inviting Peter to do something that he has done all his life. Peter is comfortable with fishing. He is familiar with it. For Peter, fishing is a big part of what is for him the status quo. So, even though he believes it to be a waste of time, Peter drops his nets into the water anyway. Peter is no different from most people in his day. People are not different in this regard still today. People tend to prefer the status quo, even when it seems a waste of time and energy. This is part of why individuals or groups of people find it difficult to change from even a harmful environment or a destructive relationship. But change is exactly what God calls people to do. Change is what God calls people to make happen and to experience happening around them.

I read about a Red Cross effort in Nigeria in the late 1960's. During the civil war there, the Red Cross was attempting to provide aid to the Igbo people in the region of Biafra. With the Red Cross gathering medicine, clothing, food, and basic supplies for the people suffering there, one day a box arrives at the supply depot. Inside the box is a collection of large sheets of white fabric. And the label on the box shows that a small town in the state of Mississippi in the USA. A Red Cross worker gathers up the cloth and takes it away to have it cut into strips for bandages.

The people working there are trying to help things change and trying to help the people there bring about positive change for themselves. It is always a question, though, is it not, whether people will embrace the chance to change when the chance to change becomes real? When the disciple Peter pulls in a huge catch of fish, it is unexpected, yes, but it is also an outcome that it

consistent with the status quo. Peter is a fisherman, and while this huge catch just about caps his career, yet, of itself, it does not necessarily change him. So, if not the catch, if not the gift and miracle, then what, or who, will enable him to change?

Peter's miraculous catch is a gift from Jesus, as he calls Peter now to put down his nets and never pick them up again. Now Peter will have to choose for himself whether he will embrace the change to which Jesus is calling him, or will he reject it in favor of clinging to the status quo; perhaps trying to convince himself that he can modify the status quo without following the difficult path of true change?

People in Church today like you and me, know, of course, the direction that Peter takes. It is a safe assumption that you and I are here today because Peter chooses to accept and pursue the changes that Jesus calls him to make. He can only be that rock upon which Jesus will build the Church because he first falls on his knees, literally and spiritually, and confesses to Jesus that he has been wrong. To complete the metaphor, the status quo cannot be a foundation for the simple reason that it is already a completed project.

Think for a moment about changes that you have made in your life. They could be recent changes, or changes that you made a long time ago. And think about change that you simply experienced. Recall the changes that you witnessed or heard about from other people that others have made in their lives. And think also about the changes that entire groups of people have made or have experienced. Personal experience, the witness of history, and the long history of the Church itself, all tell us that there is little room in which we may still grow, no space left upon which we may build, on the foundation that is the 'status quo'

God calls the prophet Isaiah to grow. God calls the prophet Isaiah to help build a people of God. And so, God calls the prophet Isaiah to change. And for Isaiah, as for anyone else, change is difficult. "My lips are unclean,"

says Isaiah. 'I am unworthy to bear witness to God's goodness, much less to speak to people on God's behalf.' Isaiah is saying, 'I cannot possibly change.' And in an important sense, he is absolutely right. Isaiah cannot on his own speak the wisdom or will of God. He cannot on his own change from being who he is to whom God is calling him to be. He cannot on his own change from doing what he does now to doing what God is calling him to do. Yet his fears about his inability to change tell us something about Isaiah. They tell God, too, something important about Isaiah.

Isaiah is painfully and fearfully aware of his inability to change. He could try to hide this from God; he could try to fake it with an outward appearance of confidence. But he does none of these. Isaiah admits to God that he wants to do what God is asking. But he admits also that he cannot do so without profound help from God to make it all happen.

And if this is true for Isaiah, for one person, and an extraordinarily good and faithful person at that, then certainly it is true for the people of God as a whole. If it is true for Peter, then it is true for the disciples as a group, and it must be true also for the followers of Jesus as a whole. This, then, is the point. The people of God are in a rather constant state of internal conflict. Sometimes mildly, sometimes robustly, yet constantly the people of God struggle with the necessary tensions of being, on the one hand, an institution of the status quo and, on the other hand, being a community of change.

"Tell this people," says God to Isaiah, to "keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand." It is a mystery that people still ponder and debate as to why God would seem to be commanding Isaiah to make sure that the people do not to grasp his message. What I suggest is that God is not prescribing to the people a command against change. I suggest that God is describing the status quo. 'Keep listening,' God is saying, 'but you will hear only what you want to hear.' 'Keep pretending to look,' says God, 'but you are going to find nothing more than what you intend to find.'

'How long, O Lord?' Isaiah cries out. To which we can almost hear God crying out the same. 'How long? indeed!' 'How long,' God cries out, 'will my people allow

the institution of the status quo to inhibit their relationship with me more than serve it?' It is God's critique of the status quo of the institutions to which the people first entrusted themselves, and to which the people have now surrendered, because they have forgotten how to do anything else. And by calling Isaiah, God is promising to do something, to send someone, that will set the people free.

At the Red Cross station in Biafra the box of white sheets is emptied out, the cloth taken away for cutting into bandages. That's when someone notices a note that is lying in the bottom of the box. "Dear Red Cross, the note reads, "We have recently made some changes in our lives." "Because of this change," the note goes on, "we want to help you if we can. These are sheets that we wore when we were members of the Ku Klux Klan. We've removed any insignias that were on them and washed them clean. We are hoping that you can put them to good use. We will never need them again."

God calls people to change. 'Thinking too lowly of yourself lately,' God asks, "and so believing yourself incapable of making a change for the better? I may be calling you to change.' 'Thinking of yourself too highly,' asks God, and so, determined to stay with the status quo? I may be calling you to the experience of change.' God calls us to welcome the gift and face the challenges of change. You can answer God's call and find yourself changing from fearful to courageous. I can answer God's call and find myself changing from bitter to generous. We can answer God's call and find ourselves helping to change the experience of other people around us from humiliation in institutions of God's power, to joy and gratitude for God's Love in the community of God's people.

God calls us to change. And more than this, every time we try, God helps us to answer the call.

And so may Almighty God, who makes known to us the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, inspire our witness to the depth and breadth of the Love of God for all; through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever. Amen.