

ALL SAINT'S DAY
November 01, 2009
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[\(Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44\)](#)

THE NEED FOR CHANGE

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, High Point, NC

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH ... AND THE MEDITATIONS OF ALL OUR HEARTS ... BE ALWAYS
ACCEPTABLE TO YOU ____ OUR STRENGTH AND OUR REDEEMER AMEN

I believe I have led 25 All Saints Day services. And every single time I have wondered ... and promised myself I would look up ... what the word “ineffable” means! Our opening prayer speaks about “ineffable joys”. This year I **finally** looked it up. So, for those who have also wondered, “ineffable” means “indescribable”. Being Episcopalians we cannot say “indescribable” we have to say “ineffable” !

A few weeks ago I had an experience I know many of you can identify with. We had been told our health insurance plan was changing and had to come to a meeting to hear about the new one.

We got to the meeting and they handed out a sheet with several columns ... not too bad ... then they mentioned it continued on the back ... then they mentioned this was an extremely abbreviated summary ... then they mentioned our packets had a book with more information but that still was a summary ... and we could go on the internet and get the full story – if we had a few days to download and read it!

I wondered how bad this could be and the presentation started. An hour and a half later, part way through the presentation most of the audience had left. I distinctly heard one many mutter something about using a dart board to choose! I

left a little while later after having decided NOT to ask my primary question — Why? Why change? Wasn't the old way good enough?

Or if you have not gone through that you might have gotten that phone call or letter from your cell phone company telling you your contract was up for renewal. BUT ... that contract was no longer offered and they would give you a new phone that would not work anything like your old phone ... BUT, your old phone was no longer being made or maintained so you had to switch. And you want to scream — Why?? Wasn't the old way good enough?

For some reasons changes in churches create even more emotional response than other changes. I have a theory about that we can discuss but the only thing that matters is that changes in church create an emotional response. Even changes most people think are positive create an emotional response.

It always does in me I know. And I have seen it in many other people.

I reflected on this some when my grandchildren were around last week. They run a lot and their parents ALLOW me to chase them so I did not reflect very long! But it struck me that all changes every change is a death – and a birth. Every change has positive and negative implications and responses.

So its not wrong to feel bad about changes – it is fairly natural. Sometimes the hard part is to ALSO see the positive implications.

For example with kids the first day of pre-school or kindergarten –

especially for the oldest and youngest child. Of course we want them to do it. We want them to go to school but there is some sadness that their lives, and our lives with them are changing in an important and permanent way.

Or when they leave home for college, or the military, or a job. Seriously — that's what we raised them to do! How often we prayed that those kids would just leave home!! ... But its also a sadness.

Or their wedding. I can only speak from experience of a father with his daughters and I can tell you it is a proud day, a happy day, and a very sad day. This MAN, this interloper, this new kid on the block is now the most important man in her life!! Pride, joy and sadness.

I handled the stress by a very brief conversation with the men. I gave them good fatherly advice: “hurt her and I will kill you”. (Of course I hope I am a member of a Christian community which would not allow me to.)

Change is something we actually want in many ways but also resist. As I heard some people say they did not understand why we needed a third service ... they would no longer see some friends every week ... I began to understand something something I am not entirely sure I like ... something that makes me a bit uncomfortable. I began to understand that this book (Bible) is all about change. I cannot think of a single major teaching that is not about us changing.

I challenge anyone to find a Bible passage that speaks about us keeping the status quo.

In today's gospel Mary and Martha had to change the way they understood Jesus. They had seen Him as a friend and prophet, now they had to change and see Him as God. I suspect that may be the most important change most of us need to make to see God as truly greater than us. To see God as someone to be obeyed rather than just discussed. ouch.

The psalm may hit it most directly, verse 3 and 4 especially: "*Who can stand in God's holy place? Those who have clean hands and a pure heart*" The author is speaking about being with God, and not just in the next life – but this life as well. And he is not talking about people who **ALREADY** have clean hands and a pure heart but about people who will change ... become cleaner and purer. The **goal** is for us to be perfect ... God's **expectation** is that we make progress – we change. The goal is perfection - the expectation is progress.

Change is hard, and not very welcome. In every 12 step program there are actually 13 steps. Step zero ... the step before what is known as step 1 ... step zero is being willing to accept the need for change. At the very least being willing to explore the **possibility** of change. Step zero in religion is to stop resisting God's attempts to change us. Few of us get past step zero. We resist God's attempts to change us. ... And here I am speaking more about individual religious change than the institutional church.

One of the most important roles of a church ... of a worshiping community is to challenge each other ... to challenge each other to change. To help each other see the need for change in our lives, and then challenge each other to make a change.

How are you closer to God than you were a month ago? What progress have you made? If that is a hard question to answer, and most months it is for me, then we have not changed.

Furthermore, if we believe as I do, that God loves us and wants the best for us then if we are not closer to God than we were a month ago it can only be because **we** resisted change. We decided ... probably without consciously asking the question, we decided our lives were good enough. God wants our lives to get better, we decided against that.

Think about the people you placed on the All Saint's Day remembrance list. There may be some you placed on the list out of obligation, but I sincerely hope there is at least one you remember because they were a saint in the sense they wanted you to be better they wanted you to change.

We will soon do the Renewal of our Baptismal Vows. One reason this is frequently done on All Saints Day when there is no baptism is to help **us** focus. We repeat it when there is a baptism but we don't focus on it much because the focus is on the baptismal candidate. Today we get to remember it is about **us**. That we are making these vows before God. We are vowing to change.

I am not asking for any specific commitment but if you have no intention of trying to change please just stand quietly .. don't make a vow to God you have no intention of keeping.

Notice that the key questions do not suggest we have never done anything right, or never made any attempt to live as God wants. Rather the questions are phrased as a question of whether we will deepen our commitment whether we plan to make progress – to change. **Page 292**

First, will you deepen your commitment ... will you make progress .. change by focusing more on scriptural teachings. .. the church ... and worship?

Will you deepen your commitment to resisting evil, and maybe most importantly, admit when you fail ?.

Will you deepen your commitment to proclaim God’s love through word and example? (we Episcopalians tend to choke on the “word” part)

Will you deepen your commitment to seek and serve Christ in **all** persons

Will you deepen your commitment to strive for justice and peace among **all** people

(Isn’t the word “all” in those questions the real sticking point? If they said to seek and serve Christ, and strive for justice and peace in **some** people, or even **most** people we could much more easily say “yes” but when we are faced by **those** people ... told to seek Christ in, and strive for justice and peace for **those** people ... the man at the corner with the sign asking for food ... the person in the hospital who may not have a green card the person at the Open Door dinner who is well dressed when we are face by those people the issue is more difficult.)

It is not coincidental or without meaning that before we get to those questions we are asked if we believe in God the Father, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. In fact, I believe the covenant would be better if after we responded that we believe in the Holy Spirit the leader would say: *Well, therefore will you continue ...* Because that's what this is all about. If we believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit then we should act as if we do! And these questions are about just that ... how we act.

I re-arranged the service slightly ... no need to bother the Bishop with that information, he is a busy man I kept in the confession which is frequently omitted for this service because I cannot think of a better time **to** confess. A better time to reflect on how we have failed to live up to the vows we have taken and confess that failure before God. Confess our failing knowing God will forgive us but also knowing God will expect us to do better from now on. ... That's the sense of the word "repent" — to do better from now on.

And during the communion time I invite you to pray the song ... not just sing but pray. It is well known and easy that you should be able to pray as you come forward for communion.

The song is "Day by Day" which most of us know from the musical *Godspell* and we will use that setting.

I think it is a great song, a great prayer to keep in mind as a theme for All Saints Day, and for our Baptismal Covenant — our agreement with God: *Day by Day - three things I pray – to see thee more clearly ... to love thee more dearly ... to follow thee more nearly, day by day* in other words, I pray I will change – day by

day..

That is the key prayer, but let's not forget the other one, the one we began with, the **reason** for being anxious to change: *“Give us grace that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you.*

AMEN

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