

***“Together, the Courage to Change”***

Summer Sermon Series on Fearless Faith

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

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Holy Scriptures: Luke 15: 1-3, 11-24

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he

went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' "

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

### ***Together, the Courage to Change***

Without any further ado, let me state right off the bat where I am coming from.

My mother Buffy Calvert wisely advises folks to back up to their assumptions.

My assumption can be summed up by Heraclitus:

*“The only constant in life is change.”*

Across 56 years on this planet as a child of God including 31 years as a pastor,

from this role shaman, as spiritual guide,

as shepherd of sheep both lost and found,

as listener of many voices,

as community organizer, activist, &  
servant leader for Christ,

I am invited into countless  
lives of amazing people.

And most, if not all of us,

go through long periods and brief experiences and sudden  
surprises

of change and transition and transformation in our  
lives.

At some point or across many points,

each of us changes and transitions, transforms and evolves;

some of us quicker than others,

some suddenly,

some subtly and gradually.

I have observed some folks so disoriented by life's changes,

by subsequent grief and loss,

by feeling like they are on sinking sand,

by sensing that everything solid melts into air

that they swing like a pendulum

from one extreme to the other.

Some folks bring to metaphysical reality the physics term that

for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

When is the best time to fix a leaky roof?

Darn tootin', when it is not raining.

So while the sun is shining (somewhere) let's take a few precious minutes together

to pray and meditate, to wonder and ponder

over having the courage to change,

to go through the process

and then to celebrate the new beginnings change affords.

When we back up to our collective assumptions we may find that we agree

that this is something we share in common: we change, we grow, we live.

We are not the same today that we were yesterday or the day before.

We are a new creation in Christ.

We go through the process of evolution of the heart and mind, body and soul;

and we share in common the Good News that the Creator, the Son

and Holy Spirit truly, deeply wants, desires, hopes

to be a core part of the processes and products

our transitions toward wholeness.

That is Good News, indeed, to know that God loves you

and lovingly wants to be a part of your spiritual change,

your psychological change, your physiological change,

and our social change.

**Together, the Holy Trinity gives to us the courage to change.**

Here are three of my favorite quotes.

The Apostle Paul said:

*“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:*

*everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!”*

In Luke 15, Jesus was talking about the Prodigal Son when he said:

*“But when he came to himself...”*

Woody Allen once said,

*“I don't believe in the afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear.”*

Okay, okay, let's focus on Jesus.

*“But when he came to himself...”*

My Homiletics professor was Dr. James Forbes.

When Dr. Forbes talked about the Parable of the Prodigal Son,

he said the young man was mad, then he was sad, then he was glad.

He was mad 'cause he was the youngest son and life looked bleak.

So he demanded his share of his father's property,

which he turned into cash and then took himself to a far off land.

He was sad 'cause when he got there

he squandered his money on loose living

and had to get a job feeding pigs.

He was so hungry, yet no one gave him anything.

*"But when he came to himself,"* said Jesus, the young man remembered.

He remembered his family.



He remembered his home and the table of hot food and warm smiles.

He remembered his God, who loved him no matter what.

He remembered the way back,

which was really the way forward,

forward to new life, new hope, new way, new freedom,  
new joy.

He had been mad; he had been sad;

when he got up and went to his father, his family, his God, Oh  
boy, was he glad!

He was glad 'cause he was received and welcomed, fussed over and  
loved.

He had been dead, but was alive again!

Lost, and now found!

Disoriented, and then reoriented!

He could never go back to who he was before: no need to; no need to.

Now he was reoriented, renewed, received and rejuvenated.

Mad, sad, glad.

We've been there, done that, sent the postcard.

We have lived and loved and been born again, and again, to tell the story.

The Good News is what we thought were endings are really a fresh start.

Mike Yaconelli said in his book, The Door:

*“The spiritual life is not so much progress as it is process.*

*It is not a continuous climb upward*

*as much as it is a continuous climb.*

*It is not the victories that matter*

*so much as the going on after the defeats.*

*The longer the erratic dance of faith goes on*

*the less you care about what God is doing*

*and the more you want to know about God.”*

### ***Together, the Courage to Change***

Comedians Amy Poehler and Tina Fey are best friends and quite observant.

Amy Poehler said, *“The only thing we can depend on in life is that everything changes.*

*The seasons, our partners, what we want and need.*

*We hold hands with our high school friends and swear to never lose touch,*

*and then we do....*

*Change is the only constant.*

*Your ability to navigate and tolerate change and its painful  
uncomfortableness*

*directly correlates to your happiness and general well-being.”*

To which Tina Fey adds, *“Researchers reported that they developed*

*a "self-healing" plastic that repairs itself if cracked.*

*The plastic will change the way airplanes are built and medicine is  
practiced.*

*In a related story, Joan Rivers will never die.”*

On this sunny day (it's sunny somewhere)

as we fix cracks and leaky roofs and leaky lives and leaky  
relationships,

let's use the following tools to help us along the way.

Three words will suffice, like Mad, Sad, and Glad, only these words  
are:

## **Orientation, Disorientation, Reorientation**

Professor Walter Brueggemann observes that the Psalms and other spiritual writings

can be understood in terms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.

Our orientation

is that we are creations of God,

a Changer who loves us, forgives us, and makes us in God's image.

We experience disorientation

whenever we feel or think of God as absent, or distant, or uncaring;

or whenever we express regret or sorrow

over the wrongs we have done or believe have been done to us.

Disorientation is unnerving, knocking us off balance and out of our comfort zone.

We feel out of balance.

We are tempted to react in strong ways and to move in opposite directions.

William Bridges in his book, Transitions, calls this process the Neutral Zone.

Bridges says of the neutral zone: *“This is the no-man’s land*

*between the old reality and the new.*

*It’s the limbo between the old sense of identity and the new.*

*It is a time when the old way is gone and the new doesn’t feel comfortable yet.*

*When you moved to your new house, or got the promotion, or had the baby.*

*The change probably happened pretty fast.*

*But that is just the external situational change.*

*Inwardly the psychological transition happened much more slowly,*

*because instead of becoming a new person as fast as you changed outwardly,*

*you actually struggled for a time*

*in a state that was neither the old nor the new.*

*It was a kind of emotional wilderness,*

*a time when it wasn't clear who you were or what was real."*

Brueggemann speaks of "that hope [which] is rooted precisely

in the midst of loss and darkness, where God is surprisingly present."

He says, "I guess I'm drawn to theology that takes seriously

the experience of weeping at night...

And doesn't let [a seemingly absent] God off the hook.

But in the anger and agony of experiences of disorientation,

[our faith] keeps talking with God,

even if it is to raise a fist and voice in protest...

Somehow in that action...

that action of refusing to give up on a God

who seems to have given up on us...

somehow... there is a new experience of the presence of God;

a rushing in of new wonder, gift, gratitude."

Brueggemann says that it's "because this One [God]

has promised to be in the darkness with us,

we find the darkness strangely transformed,



not by the power of easy light,

but by the power of relentless  
solidarity.

Out of the 'fear not' of that One [God] spoken in the darkness,

we are marvelously given new life, we know not how."

Our orientation is good: we are made in the image of God, who is  
love.

Our disorientation is disturbing, distancing, distressing,

yet it is not the end but a time of transition.

God is nigh; God is present;

God is with us in the darkness and the fear, the grief and the  
loss.

We are given new life, new direction, new hope, a new way.

We are reoriented.

We who were so mad, so sad, have reason and hope to be glad.

Jesus' father figure in the Parable of the Prodigal Son as well as the Psalmists

teach us to welcome reorientation

with shouts of joy and prayers of thanksgiving

for what God does to lead us out of being  
disoriented

and into a renewed sense of life and  
love.

At the core of reorientation

is the blessed reality of reconciliation, resurrection,

and the renewal of our relationships

with God and one another and our true sense  
of self.

***Together, the Courage to Change***

E. Claiborne Jones is an Episcopal priest in the Atlanta area.

Claiborne Jones spoke recently about a story she had read that moved her.

*“I read a story...about a little girl and her mother*

*who visited a sculptor’s studio each day,*

*watching the artist carve a lion out of a huge block of marble.*

*Finally, one day, the animal’s figure was clear,*

*and the child recognized what it was.*

*She turned to her mother and said,*

*‘Mom, how did that man know that there was a lion in there?’*

*“As we, all of us, continue to grow and to flourish,*

*I hope that we will remember that it is, finally,*

*love alone which set us free.*

*Christ's love, offered to us through 4-year-olds and grandparents,*

*teachers, and friends, who have the courage to tell the truth.*

*Christ's love alone sets us free to be ourselves,*

*whether we are wealthy or poor, famous or unknown, not so good or good."*

Claiborne Jones went on to say,

*"In my yearbook my senior year, a friend wrote:*

*'Claibby, remember how many of us love you just for being you.'*

*Remember how many people love you, just for being you."*

Claiborne Jones once offered a list of ten things to consider in life and ministry,

including a word of encouragement to believe

in "*authentic humanity as the place where resurrection takes place.*"

In other words, the human condition is the place where God chooses to work miracles,

where God's renewing power is made real,

where God is working Her purpose out,

where God changes lives and reshapes souls.

### ***Together, the Courage to Change***

Every week men and women and teenagers,

families and friends gather together in this sacred place and peaceful space

to connect with the Holy and one another in the hopes of change.

In addition to our Sunday morning gatherings,

we also host Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Al-Anon.

On Sunday, Monday and Tuesday nights folks enter this physical plant

so they can sit and commune with each other and listen to their own souls.

They seek the wisdom of the Changer and the support of the changed.

Each meeting begins with a prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr:

*“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*the courage to change the things I can,*

*and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

They open each personal statement by introducing themselves

honestly and authentically, saying, like I do,

“Hello, my name is James and I am a recovering addict.”

Some say, “I am an alcoholic.”

However one introduces oneself is less important

than the fact that one is present,

that we seek to be held accountable and a part of the process

of God’s healing and hospitality and hope.

In the out pouring of the stories and surrounding words and show of support,

folks discover together the courage to change,

to draw deep upon a Higher Power,

to get psyched to walk out these doors with heads held high

and a renewed determination to be

clean and sober

for the next hour, the next day,  
for one more week.

As the meetings draw to a close hands are held, heads are bowed,

the Lord's Prayer is offered,

and then neighbors go into the night to their  
neighborhoods,

emboldened and embraced by the Spirit of  
God.

Mad, sad, glad.

We've been there, done that, bought the t-shirt.

We have lived and loved and been born again, and again, to tell the  
story.



The Good News is what we thought were endings are really fresh starts.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*