

The Rev. Anne Largent Smith
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 Proper 18B: Mark 9:38-50

Maybe you know the old joke: a Buddhist goes up to a hotdog stand, and says to the vendor, "Make me one with everything." The Buddhist hands the vendor a twenty, and waits. Finally he asks, "Where's my change?" The vendor replies, "Ah, change comes from within."

Change has been very much on my mind this week. St. Mary's is experiencing change; changing the music, particularly the Gloria, at the 10:00 service has caused a bit of a stir, so that's one thing. And the bigger change behind that is still the fact that Kristin and I as new members of staff and you as the congregation are all still adjusting to the change of being here together. In constructing a timeline of the parish, we've thought more about what has changed during the 28 years St. Mary's has been in existence. At least five people have moved away from St. Mary's this year, all to be closer to children and grandchildren—Fr. Howdy and Frances to El Dorado Hills, Maria Yearwood to Southern California, Paula Sink to Placerville, and now Eva Moredock to Idaho.

And then there are the many changes life has brought to each of us individually. And the seasons are changing, and Apple changed the font on my phone this week. It's a cliché because it's true: change is constant. And we long for touchstones in our lives, things we can rely on to stay the same amidst all of that. Because we resist change even as we long for it and experience it; we have this push-pull relationship with change. Sometimes we want to change ourselves, and we struggle to do so; sometimes we think things are going along the same as ever, only to realize one day that we in fact have been changing and just weren't aware of it. And then there's the world and the people around us; the rate at which they do or do not change is almost never the rate we think we'd prefer.

No matter what our hopes are for things changing, and no matter what our feelings are about change, I think it's important to acknowledge something: all change involves loss. When things change, we lose the way things were before. In many cases, even when we want the change and are excited about it, it's hard to deal with that loss. We may even need to grieve for what has now changed. And whatever our mix of feelings of excitement and anticipation and fear and loss, change requires effort. I think it's possible to forget that sometimes. I think sometimes we don't give ourselves credit for the full mix of our feelings and the energy we have to expend to adjust to the new.

I think it's worth acknowledging all of that and realizing that it's going to be okay. We are going to be okay. God is present; God is wise; God is guiding us and loving us through all of this. God will give us what we need.

I don't mean to be pat or to suggest that we blindly embrace any and all change, but I do want to encourage us to go ahead and try, to discern where the Spirit is moving among us and to change accordingly. And to trust as we do so that God will help us.

I find good news to this effect in today's Gospel. Which surprised me when I found it, because this passage is sort of a tough one. The reading picks up with John saying to Jesus something that is actually a response to a verse we don't hear: you may recall that Jesus had been teaching the disciples about he would inaugurate the Kingdom of God by his death and resurrection, and that the disciples didn't understand and were afraid to ask him about it. Among themselves the disciples were arguing about

who among them would be the greatest in the Kingdom—assuming the kingdom will involve not a state execution but a military victory and the establishment of a new government with Jesus as king, in which they would be in authority right underneath him. Remember how Jesus corrected them, saying that whoever wanted to be first must be the last of all.

So there go their dreams of being important leaders who could demand respect and prestige and maybe even a little deferential treatment. And in a worldly kingdom, those in highest authority would welcome people in the name of the king, and the people they would welcome would be important, powerful, rich, and influential. They would be “somebodies” in this world. But Jesus speaks to that idea too—not only are their notions of their own power and position upside-down, but their notions of who is to be honored and welcomed in the kingdom are upside-down too.

Jesus takes a child into his arms and says, “It’s this one you’re to welcome in my name.” Which doesn’t mean that Jesus likes babies or children; it means that in the kingdom of God, the followers of Jesus honor God by welcoming and serving people with no social standing—which the child represents, because children at that time had no status as people and no rights within society. Followers of Jesus honor God by welcoming and serving those with no status, those who are vulnerable and helpless and the least among us. That’s what we are to do when we serve in Jesus name, and that is what John seems to be responding to here. Because speaking of doing things in his name, the disciples have just stopped someone from casting out demons in the name of Jesus.

I’m not really sure what John’s intent is here; what is the spirit behind what he says? Is John suggesting that Jesus should be pleased with the disciples for doing this, or is he beginning to see that they shouldn’t have done it? Is he bringing it up just because Jesus is talking about doing things in his name? Is he seeking Jesus’s approval for what they have done in telling the man to stop? I do get the feeling that John is saying to Jesus, “Aren’t we good boys for protecting your kingdom and authority in this way?”

Whatever John was looking for, what he got was Jesus telling them no—don’t do that!

Jesus gives several reasons for this: anyone who is doing deeds of power in his name will not soon be able to speak evil of Jesus, whoever is not against us is for us, and the very smallest mercy shown in the name of Jesus matters. So it’s not a matter of controlling everyone’s actions as followers of Jesus, or vetting everyone to make sure they’re following Jesus right, or pushing people out to ensure that only some so-called “true” followers of Jesus get to claim to act in his name. And again it’s also not a matter of amassing power and influence and prestige—it’s a matter of serving and showing mercy and loving the most vulnerable among us.

Then Jesus goes on to talk about how important it is not to put a stumbling block in the way of such vulnerable and powerless people who believe in him—still referring to this child he’s holding, and also those whom the child represents. He says it would be better to drown quickly and horribly than to put cause one of them to stumble. He says it would be better for his followers to cut off their own hands, feet, eyes than to do anything to cut themselves off from the kingdom. Being cut off from the kingdom would be incredibly bad, apparently comparable to being burned alive and eaten by worms.

Does Jesus go off the rails here? Is he changing the subject, even? This is one of the places in the Bible where I have spent years simply taking literally what Jesus says here, and noticing that I’ve never seen or heard of a Christian, at least not in modernity, who maimed him- or herself in order to avoid what he

calls “stumbling”—which seems to be sin meriting punishment in hell. I’ve read that this series of admonitions refers to male sexual sin, and that it may specifically refer to men sexually abusing children, which was socially acceptable in the Roman empire—remember, children had no status. And I find that I share Jesus’s passion for protecting children from such abuse.

Jesus finally makes a broader point, that everyone will be tempted, and when his followers give in to that temptation, their ability to make a difference in the world and to heal relationships becomes compromised. Have salt in yourselves, Jesus says—don’t sell out to the world’s way of wielding power and authority, and amassing wealth and influence. Especially don’t treat other people the way society seems to say we can, discounting their lives, limiting their opportunities, taking advantage of them, visiting evil upon them.

And what does all that have to do with change? I think this passage of the gospel speaks to the ways God wants to transform us and the world—transformation meaning, of course, change. And if it was hard for the disciples, I think it’s okay for us to struggle with it, too. It’s our work to continue to check our assumptions and expectations, and hear what Jesus has to say about them. Sometimes we’ll discover, like John and the disciples, that the Kingdom of God is bigger than we thought, and that God is working in ways we never imagined. And it’s our work to continue to foster the transformation of ourselves and our community and our world, so that we do show mercy to the vulnerable and bring healing to those in need. We do that in a lot of ways here; today we will take an offering to support this work as it’s being carried out by St. John’s Program for Real Change. We’re looking for real change, good change. And I don’t think the hot dog vendor had it quite right; I suppose some change can come from within, but I trust that lasting, transformative change comes from above.

Amen.