

CHANGE: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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*“The law of God is a law of **change**, and... when the Churches set themselves against change as such, they are setting themselves against the law of God.”*

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Anglo-Irish playwright, critic. *Saint Joan*, preface.

As I worked on the two recent monographs on lifelong learning which you can find at the NAAD website,¹ I became aware that below the surface of these ideas lurked the notion of our engagement with and attitude towards change. Learning after all is a willingness to participate in and effect change. I became aware of the fundamental need to embrace change and to see it as a friendly imperative.

I also worked on these monographs through a period of a major national political campaign where change was the watchword and call to action. Yet when I heard my friends and colleagues talk about change, it was more often in the context of changing back, a nostalgia for return to familiarity and to perceived security. I didn't hear the call for change to something new, to new possibilities, and to a new and perhaps different way of thinking and being. I connected this idea with the faith, hope, and prayers of the church for the coming of the Kingdom of God and I began more and more to see our relationship with God as a relationship and calling to and for change.

I begin my thoughts on this topic from a Greek word, common to the everyday life activity of Christian community. I begin with *metanoia* as a fundamental thought on change. On one of the internet dictionaries I find this definition: *metanoia: a change of mind, as it appears to one who repents, of a purpose he has formed or of something he has done.*² This was yet another idea about change.

In our prayers at the Great Vigil of Easter and at other times when we pray for the church:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* [BCP, p 291]

¹ <http://www.diakonoi.org/>

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metanoia>

I have a friend who points to this collect from the first line, God of unchangeable power. She notes that power that is unchangeable is the power of divine love. I think that's a striking image and serves as a beginning for the context of this collect. I wonder how things can be raised up or made new unless it occurs there is a process of change from what was to what is and what can be? My friend says, "...change in creation is rooted in—but, implicitly, not determined by—the power of divine love."³ How can this change be effected except by God's unchangeable power. My friend ends with:

Then if one takes a look at changes in creation—does God do them? Does God tinker with creation? No, creation evolves, but God supports, embraces, loves change in creation. Or another way to put it—change in creation is rooted in, but, implicitly not determined by, the power of divine love.⁴

This is yet another idea about change. It seems grounded in the idea of changing creation to something new, refreshed, reconciled through the power of God's divine love.

In the Gospel according to Matthew we read:

Matthew 18:1-6

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" **2** He called a child, whom he put among them, **3** and said, "***Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*** **4** Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. **5** Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. **6** If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."

In Jesus context, to become like children is to be in a state of vulnerability and powerlessness. I believe this speaks powerfully about the antithesis towards which we strive. We have a propensity to move toward a state of power and control. This is truly change indeed. To give up what we strive for and to return to the a state of vulnerability not only to God but also to one another. This may be the greatest change required for salvation.

And again:

Matthew 21:28-32

28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' **29** He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. **30** The father went to the second and

³ Personal conversation with Deacon Josephine Borgeson, Diocese of Northern California.

⁴ Ibid.

said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. **31** Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. **32** *For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.*"

If we see Christ and we see what he does in our lives and in the lives of others and we fail to change our minds and believe in him, we are less than the tax collectors and prostitutes. I wonder if this is a pericope also connected to following Jesus, doing what he does in our ministries? It believe also that this is a pericope of implication, i.e., if you do not believe in John, you also reject me. Jesus, like John, comes in the state of righteousness. If we believe in him, we will be saved like the oppressed of the world. Believing is changing, changing to something new, a new concept of righteousness as seen in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Yet again:

Matthew 6:9-15 § The Lord's Prayer

9 Pray then like this: Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be your name. **10** Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. **11** Give us today our daily bread; **12** And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors; **13** And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. **14** For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; **15** but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

If the Kingdom of God is to come to earth as we pray that it will, earth needs to undergo drastic and inevitable change. If we are to achieve forgiveness, we need to forgive others and to forgive is to cherish change from what is to what may be. A new state of being standing in God's grace. To be delivered from evil is to implore human change from an inevitable state of being to a new state of being that occurs through God's intervention.

From the Gospel according to Luke:

Luke 13:1-5

1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. **2** He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? **3** *No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.* **4** Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? **5** *No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*"

In this pericope, the church is told repentance, change, a turning around to a new direction, is the only way to salvation and not to repent, not to change, achieves obliteration, death, destruction. Change is essential to salvation in this example from what we are and what we do to what God calls us to. This is clearly not changing back but a change to a new future direction.

From the Acts of the Apostles:

Acts 2:37-41

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" **38** Peter said to them, "**Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**" **39** For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." **40** And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." **41** So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

How is it possible to be saved from a corrupt generation unless we change from what we're doing and how we're living to the life and purposes of God's love and justice? To be baptized and welcomed into the church is to turn around, to repent, and in so doing we are given the Holy Spirit. To repent and live the Gospel life produces the fruit of change and three thousand persons are added. God welcomes us and chooses us and we respond by changing from the ways of a corrupt generation and are given salvation freely, generously, and by grace.

These are only a few of the pericopes possible that are relevant to change and the nature of our relationships with God and with one another. The theme recurs so frequently, especially in the context of repentance, that one can barely read any of the Gospels for very many lines before coming to the idea of change from whom we are to whom we may become. For this monograph, I turn now to our baptismal covenant and end with end with some Q&A from the catechism found in the Book of Common Prayer:

From the service of Baptism, BCP, pp 299-314:

Question: Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Question: Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Question: Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Question: Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

Question: Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

Question: Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

[BCP, pp 302-303]

The Baptismal Covenant

Celebrant: Do you believe in God the Father? In God the Son? In God the Holy Spirit?

Celebrant: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Celebrant: Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.

Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Celebrant: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

[BCP, pp 304-305]

Pay attention to the verbs. In the opening questions, to renounce, to turn to, to put trust in, to follow and obey, all these not only imply movement from where we are to where we're called but imply we have to change from where we are to where we're called. In the promises themselves the verbs are to believe, to continue, to persevere in resistance, to repent, to return, to proclaim, to seek out and serve, to love others even as we do ourselves, to strive for God's agenda and respect the dignity of all human beings. The fundamental connection of these verbs of action is that we are making commitments from what and who we were to what and who we can become for the sake of membership in a community of believers in God and God's vision for and commitment to the Kingdom already established by Jesus Christ and to the Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven sometime in the future. Fundamental to the nature of these promises is a commitment to growth and development, i.e., we will not stay where we are but we will move closer and closer to God's truth and light.

And now from the Outline of the Faith or catechism found in the Book of Common Prayer:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?

A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims

the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

[BCP, p 855]

And since I'm concerned with the theology of change with respect to the church, let me continue in the Q&A with the question and answer posed about the Holy People of God and referred to in the last Q&A immediately above relative to ministry:

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

[BCP, p 855]

The implication of all these excerpts is a fundamental acknowledgement and willingness to embrace change and also to willingly participate in and effect change. As in the baptismal covenant, pay attention to the verbs. Restoration implies reconciliation and that requires changes in relationships. To pray, proclaim, and promote justice is to follow Jesus into the world, to act in ways that Christ is exemplified through our actions, and to work for the welfare, dignity and rights of all believers. Can this be accomplished, indeed, is it even necessary unless there is an expectation to change from where we are now to what we can become? Change is fundamental to our relationship with God and Jesus Christ and our entire commitment to learning, which I prefer, or formation, as is more commonly encountered in the discourse of the church, conjures the image of living the life of change as we grow in Christ.

Once again, let me state the premise where I began, but let me state it clearly and succinctly, ***our fundamental relationship with God and one another is predicated on change.***

I am not advocating change for the sake of change but rather change for a purpose. I propose that the change that is necessary for the implementation of the Kingdom of God here on earth requires the kind of change that:

- Results in metanoia. A change that is grounded fundamentally in repentance. We need to acknowledge we stand together as humanity in need of this kind of change.
- Results in reconciliation. A change that strives for and pursues an outcome of unity with God and one another. We needn't look too far around us for a beginning point for this kind of change. I bet we could come up with 5 individuals without trying very hard with whom we need to reconcile

today, right now. Imagine a day spent in trying to change from what is to what's possible in only 5 relationships!

- Results in forgiveness, restoration, and a new direction of life. Whether we're on the giving or receiving end of forgiveness or reconciliation, the results are the same. We've moved a couple of steps closer to the Kingdom of God on earth.

A Call to Conversation and Conversion

As a deacon in the Diocese of Chicago, I remember Frank Griswold, former Bishop of Chicago and later Presiding Bishop, used to speak passionately about the connection between conversation and conversion. Reaching back etymologically to its origin from the Latin, *conversare*, to converse or to talk, but talking in such a way that we are converted to something new, that we can see a new vision, a new light, a new possibility. He used to make this connection which for me is exemplified in the word dialogue. This word from the Greek *dia-logos* is a way of thinking *through* the *word*, perhaps this is more theologically rich and I submit is the same as being changed, transformed through conversation. Erasmus in his *Apologia de In Principio Erat Sermo*,⁵ argued that the translation of *logos* is done as well by *sermo* which is *conversation* as it is by *verbum* which is *word*. He asserts, in fact, that the early Christian writers used these two ways of thinking interchangeably. Nevertheless, if in the beginning was the conversation and the conversation is intended to convert, the essence and nature of creation is one based on change. Fundamentally, the relationship between God and creation is one of order from chaos and life from death, very great changes indeed. Our very engagement with and participation in God's creation is based on change.

I've come to this view by way of thinking about learning. By training I am a learning psychologist whose life and work are connected to adult learning and the change resulting from it. I presented in two monographs you may find at the NAAD website⁶ the essentiality of lifelong learning to our baptismal promises, to our ministries, to our relationship with God, to our daily way engaging the world and one another. I have presented that engagement based on the moral imperative of lifelong learning. Learning is a change process and therefore an essential commitment and tool for engaging the kind of change I'm referring to in this monograph. Since our relationships to God and one another are based on change, learning is a process tool for engaging change.

At the recent General Convention Resolution #2006-A090; *Resolved*, That the 75th General Convention commend the work of PEALL (Proclaiming Education for All) and affirm the continuation of this work as a key part of the future planning for integrated, holistic education in the Church, was adopted. Church resources and commitment to lifelong learning was affirmed, but the consequences of, the resources for, and the moral imperative necessary are yet to be seen. Actually implementing this work and not just commending it will be further evidence of the change that lies at the heart of Christ's gospel and the answer to the prayer that God's Kingdom will come on earth as in

⁵ <http://www.jstor.org/pss/4173446>

⁶ <http://www.diakonoi.org/>

heaven.

As the Episcopal Church we claim reason as a fundamental condition in our relationships. If we truly believe this and are committed to it, then we cannot withhold resources for the development of the laity, the Holy People of God, indeed, THE CHURCH. If our budget represents the place where I heart lies, then our budget needs to give first priority to learning and the change that results from it. This is, after all, the mission of the church, i.e., to reconcile all things to God and one another through Christ. Reconciliation is a process of change. Change is facilitated by learning and reason. Reason is as much a process of learning than it is a fundamental condition of relationship.

At the end of this monograph I remain resolute as at the beginning and try to present to the reader the evidence on which I've come to my understanding and my hope that change, change grounded in God's love, changed grounded in God's justice will be the plain old routine method of operation informed and engendered by lifelong learning and reason.