Nu’uanu Congregational Church

September 23, 2020

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

*“Presto Change-o!”* Matthew 21:23-32

I have been thinking about change a lot lately. Making the move to come here to Oahu has a lot to do with that, I suppose. Also, as you know, the work our church leadership has been engaged in has been all about change.

The thing is: change is hard work! I suppose you know that.

Change has been the bane of human existence for as long as we have lived, and yet change is inevitable and necessary. Most of us like the comfort of familiar things and ways. Have you ever heard the saying: the only person in the world who likes change is a baby in a wet diaper? It’s very true. It also has to have been inspired by the reading we just heard.

The chief priests and scribes have been confronted by a big change that has landed right on their doorstep—literally!

Just before this encounter, Jesus has come into Jerusalem, into the Temple, and the first thing he does is cause a commotion as he evicts the money changers and the vendors. This has been reported to the chief priests and scribes who make a plan to publicly discredit him.

Aside from driving out the others from the Temple, Jesus has been preaching and teaching and has been introducing a lot of new ideas. Whether it was the vendors or the preaching, he has stirred things up quite a lot, and they have decided to teach him a lesson.

So, a group of them accost him as he is sitting with a group of disciples. Hoping to embarrass him, the priests and scribes ask him to explain from where he has received his authority do the things he does, and preach the ideas he preaches. They are hoping that he will say something outlandish or something that clearly shows that he is a con-man or blasphemer.

Instead of falling into their trap, as we saw, he turns the tables on them and tricks them into silence. Jesus gives them the opportunity to prove their own trust worthiness. Instead they fall into making the same kind of error in which they were hoping to catch him—an error of hypocrisy and untruth.

In response to this test—theirs and his—Jesus tells them the parable of the two brothers.

As Jesus recounts how one brother gives his word but does not follow through, and the other brother says no, but then has a change of heart, we see him describing to the chief priests, scribes, and others who had gathered to hear him, that it is not the words or the outward appearance of either of the brothers that made them righteous, but their actions and ways that they responded to the father’s call.

What Jesus wants them to see is that the very people they tend to look down on are the ones who are hearing his, and John’s call to repentance and change—*and they are doing it!*

In other words, this discipleship life is not about the position we hold in the community, or the exalted company we keep. It’s about how we are transformed by the message. It is about hearing the truth and acknowledging the one who has offered it, and responding by living our faith out in an embodied and active way.

The problem is, making a change is very hard for most of us. We get into routines. We invest a lot into them, too. Often, we become so deeply immersed in our routines, which include our way of seeing and experiencing life, that it becomes very difficult to imagine another way.

For example, when I first came here last March, I felt very awkward recording my sermons in front of a camera. I missed hearing and seeing people in front of me, filling the pews, and stopping to chat after worship. I missed hugging people during the passing of the peace.

After fifteen weeks, we were given the go ahead to bring in-person worship back into the Sanctuary. We were all thrilled. I was too…and I was nervous.

After only fifteen weeks, I had fallen into a routine. I had even gotten pretty comfortable in it. After almost twenty years in ministry, which was all in-person, I suddenly felt out of practice at being in front of a room full of people again. And it did not matter that that the Sanctuary was not full for the four weeks we were here together. It was still a nervous making activity to get used to preaching in front of a live congregation again.

Change is hard. Giving up a way of thinking and living in the world—even when the new thing is good—is very hard for most of us. It was difficult among the people of Jesus’ day, and when we are very honest, we know that they *were* like we *are*.

Think about it, even the main protagonists in this story—the chief priests and scribes—even they were always telling themselves and each other how deeply they longed for the Messiah to come. It was a promise they had been praying for and believing in for hundreds of years, and I believe their desire was sincere. All of their prayers and traditions were centered around that hope, and that promise.

Yet, when they met Jesus, even after questioning him and trying to expose him as a fraud does not work, they were still unable to accept him. They were unable to make that leap of faith into new life.

Routine can be a habit of the mind and spirit, too.

That is one of the hardest things about being the church in 2020. The world has changed so much in the past few decades. We have gone from the jet age to the digital age, and it has not been easy. Indeed, one of the unexpected gifts of this very unusual time is that is has taken a lot of us and dragged us into the digital age—and guess what? It has been good for us! We have learned new skills, and we have learned, once again, how much we care about one another, and miss each other when we are separated.

But like it or not, we have been transformed.

The difficult news is that God is not done with us. God is not done transforming us. God is not finished making new gifts available to us. The Good News is that God is also going to help us get ready for the continuing life of transformation.

This past week I got view the oral history project the church worked on last year. I hope you will all view it. It is on our website. What I love about it are the stories people tell of starting out with this church; and living and growing with it. I love their stories of how their lives changed, and how they did not fall away, but held on and took that ride with Christ and each other into the future.

We are now the beneficiaries of their commitment and faith and there is lots of good news connected with that. First, our good news is that we stand on a firm foundation others have made for us, and which we will further build on for those who come after us. The better news is that we have been well equipped with each others’ stories, and with our continuing relationships of love and trust for and with each other. Best news of all, we have a God who has been faithful for all this time, and who promises to stay with us through all of our life.

When I was a little girl, there was a magician on television who made things change with the wave of his wand and the words, *Presto, Change-o!* It will not be like that for us. There will be lots of conversation, lots and exchanging of ideas, and hopes, but change is coming to us, but do not be afraid. Rather, remember that God is with us.

What I and the leaders of this church ask for are your patience, your prayers for all of us, and your attention (there are going to be several ways to keep up with the plans and are being developed), so that we can go together into the future God has for us with a hopeful heart, and a calm spirit.

Amen.