

R. Grant Mansfield

January 25, 2015

Church of the Holy Comforter

Throwing away the box...

May the reflections of my heart be pleasing to you o God and may the hearts and minds of this community be open to hearing them. Amen

Change is all around us. It is frightening, challenging, and horrifically beautiful. Most importantly, it is inevitable. We might as well accept that fact now, rather than avoid it. From our very conception, we are immersed in change. It marches forward relentlessly, leaving nothing untouched. The march can be either slow or fast; either way, it is always occurring. Every breath we take in is different from the last, each second we are alive we grow older and hopefully wiser. We may not notice the changes at first, but if we stop for a second to observe ourselves and the world around us, we will see this change happening. Have you ever taken a few moments to glance out a window? Perhaps

with a glance, you would notice rain starting to form and fall from the sky, as it is a quick change of such a large magnitude. Yet, on the surface, everything else may seem to remain the same; but, if you are fully present in the moment, all you would see would be tiny changes constantly occurring, all of which would have prepared you for the coming of the rain. The clouds you first saw in the sky are gone and are replaced by new ones. A passing breeze moves the leaves of the trees and blades of grass into a new position, ever so slightly. You will notice the flowers of the garden slowly growing and dying, along with all the insects scurrying around to new places. All of these changes are small, but still noticeable if you center yourself into the moment and watch.

Of course, our society doesn't teach us to take notice of the small changes; rather, only the large ones. We take notice of the changes that are blatant to us and ask ourselves, "how did that come about"; but if we were present and aware, we would notice all of the small changes that lead up to the big one. What is even more challenging for us is that our society also teaches us a very hypocritical stance when it comes to change. We all desire it on some level, but then when it is happening to

us, we resist it much like a teenager might resist the direction and authority of a parent. We scurry back to what is safe for us and throw up the walls. Take Jonah for example. Here is a man who God called to go out to Nineveh and proclaim a message of justice to them. Now, Jonah wasn't born a prophet, nor did he ever plan on becoming one. Yet, God instigated a change in him, a big one...and, instead of embracing that change and growing from it, he flees from God, desiring the safety of what he knows, rather than finding out what great things could be outside of his tiny walls. Then, after much nagging, prodding, and general fish consumption, he grumpily accepts the change and does what God commanded him to do. The funny thing is, once he does what God asks of him, he kind of enjoys it. So much so that when the people to which he was proclaiming to immediately accepted his plea, changed without balking, and God granted them mercy, he grew angry at God because God didn't obliterate them as originally planned. In this short story, we see Jonah begin as apprehensive towards change, then FINALLY embracing it, just to turn back around and become

apprehensive about it again when God initiates another change. Doesn't seem like he learned anything, does it?

How about our reading from Mark this morning? There we see nothing but change. We find Jesus calling out to individuals, telling them to leave behind their only source of income, their families, and all that they knew, just to follow him, a man who they really didn't know that much about. Yet, unlike Jonah, they jump at the chance, throw down their nets and off they went, no thought required. Now, I ask you, who are you more like? Jonah, or the men from Mark? Realistically speaking, we are all Jonah. We wouldn't just drop everything and run off with some stranger who came by and said, "hey y'all, come follow me and I'll make you fishers of people!" Instead, I think we would all put up our walls like Jonah did, think the person a little strange, and go back to our work. In all honesty, I don't even believe that Mark presents this story truthfully. What most likely happened is that it took time for those individuals to come around to that hard decision. They probably already knew Jesus pretty well, had heard him preach, and most certainly brought along their families with them. Yet, though Mark's

story is unrealistic when compared to what might have actually occurred, he may have had a theological reason for presenting the story in this way. While we all may be Jonahs at heart, perhaps Mark's purpose was to depict how we all SHOULD respond when God is calling us, when change occurs.

Constantly accepting and embracing change is fundamental for living out our faith and understanding our relationship with God. Nothing shows this more than the meaning of God's name itself. In the Book of Exodus, God gives to Moses and through him, humanity, a glimpse into the true nature of who God is. Though we do not use the term "Yahweh", the Hebrew name for God, in our worship and liturgy, perhaps we should or, at the very least, recognize and discuss its meaning and importance on a constant basis. Listen to this passage: "But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "*I Am who I Am.*" He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, '*I Am* has sent me to you.'" Isn't that miraculous?! When asked for the name, God

responds with giving its meaning, “I Am who I Am” or, a more accurate translation of the Hebrew would be “I Will Be what I Will Be.” By revealing the divine name to humanity, God opens the doors of knowledge and understanding to us, giving us a glimpse of God’s true nature, a nature that is always evolving and changing.

This is why the presentation of Mark’s story is so important for us. Though we may be Jonahs at heart, God is calling us to be and act as the fictitious disciples are in Mark’s story. The sad thing is, it is SO HARD for us to be that kind of disciple. Because we naturally cling to what is safe and what we know, we turn away from God and are unable to make those huge changes God is calling us to make. That is, unless we are constantly watching and embracing the small ones that prepare us for the big changes. The readings from today remind me of a time not so long ago when I was personally struggling with a changing faith and relationship with God. It was during the fall semester of my senior year that I began to understand God in a different way, look at God through different eyes, and experience God’s power in a way that I never had before. These changes in understanding, while small in the grand

scheme of things, scared me to my core, so much so that I feared that by voicing my questions and changes in belief to my faith community, I would be alienated by them. So, I turned to a trusted mentor and friend for advice, who funny enough just happened to be an ordained clergy member of the Baptist Church. To her, I revealed my questions and doubts: what if Jesus wasn't divine, but was fully human and only the greatest prophet; what if he was divine and God revealed Godself through him; if we understand and say that God is beyond gender, why do we use solely masculine language in the Church; is it wrong for me to see and connect with God through the feminine, rather than the masculine; how can I be true to my understanding of God, while still respecting other understandings; why is my understanding changing now, when I have never questioned it before?

To my questions, she offered this advice and council:

God is beyond our full comprehension and knowing, because God is always changing. As we grow, learn, and experience life, God molds Herself to be what is most relatable to us, taking on the form and understanding that we can connect with the most. Where our

doubts and questions come from is that all of us develop an understanding of God and hold onto it for dear life. We take it and we place it into a box and shut the lid. We place God in a box and refuse to let Him out. Eventually, God comes along and places these questions in our hearts, hoping that we will wrestle with them, embrace them, and tear open the box we have imprisoned God in. If we are open to that change, we throw open the box and let God out. In that moment, we see God in a new light and develop a deeper understanding of who and what God truly is. And again, we will be at peace, at least until we become comfortable with that understanding and we begin to place God back into a box, a new one, but still a confining box. What God calls us to do with our lives is to keep throwing away those boxes each and every time they start to sneak back into our lives. We are to embrace the questions, embrace the fear, and embrace the change that is God.

That memory stays in the forefront my mind, always reminding me to remain open to the changes that God has made, is making, and will



continue to make. There is no stopping Her from being who She is, so rather than hide from God, I try and embrace Her every day.

Here are my questions to you: what does the box look like that you have kept God in? What questions has God placed into your heart? Are you wrestling with them or are you ignoring them? How might your relationship with God grow, flourish, and become more meaningful if you asked them, both to yourself and others? How can we, as a community of faith, embrace these questions together and provide a safe, loving, nurturing, and trusting environment in which to ask them? Finally, do you wish to remain a Jonah your whole life, or do you desire to become a disciple of change, a disciple of the ever-changing, living God?

In the name of the great I Am. Amen.