

Worship Series: Thriving Through Transitions

February 2 "Changes"

February 9 "Endings"

February 16 "Neutral Zone"

February 23 "Beginnings"

"Changes"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, 02-02-2020

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Holy Scriptures: Genesis 1: 1-5; Matthew 18: 1-5; Romans 12: 1-2

Genesis 1:1-5

Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Matthew 18:1-5

True Greatness

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Romans 12:1-2

The New Life in Christ

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Resource: Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes, by William Bridges, 1980.

Surrender, and Be Transformed

Well, in case you haven't heard, the Super Bowl is tonight.
The Kansas City Chiefs,
 who last won the Super Bowl exactly 50 years ago,
 will take on the San Francisco 49ers,
 who have a coach who served on the Atlanta Falcons coaching
 staff.

And no, I am not talking about He Who Must Not Be Named
 whose initials are Kyle Shanahan.
I am talking about Katie Sowers.

She—yes, she—is the 49ers' Assistant Offensive Coordinator,
 coaching players and calling plays when the 49ers have the ball.
We are talking about changes and transitions;
 the glass ceiling in professional sports being shattered
 is certainly a major change.

Katie Sowers publicly shared another change she's gone through.
She recently came out about her sexuality.
Sowers has been with her girlfriend, Cara, for some time now.
In September 2019,
 Sowers posted the kindest message from Cara's grandmother.

Sowers' Instagram caption says:
*"If you want to see an example of true unconditional love,
 please read this letter my girlfriend received from her grandma
 after she recently came out to her family about dating a woman."*

We can imagine that Cara's grandmother saw a lot of change in her lifetime,
 and could have responded in any number of ways,
 or simply chosen to not respond at all to her granddaughter's coming out.

Here is Cara's grandmother's note:
*"CBS: Just want you to know that we welcome whatever path you choose in life.
 Just be the good person you are and most of all, "Be Happy!"
 Would love to meet Katie when her whirlwind world slows down—
 she sounds like a beautiful person.
 Hope to see you soon. Grandma"*

Grandma sounds like someone, surrounded by grace, who surrendered her soul to
God.

Bet she's pulling for the 49ers.

Surrender, and Be Transformed

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,

*the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.
Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.
And God saw that the light was good..." –Genesis 1: 1-5*

God created something out of something.
God beheld a formless void and darkness,
and God created something out of something and set light in the sky,
and the darkness has not overcome it.
And God saw that the light was good.

The Lord would go on to create out of something life, and love,
Jesus of Nazareth, and the Church.
And God saw that humanity and all of creation,
everything that God made, was good.

This is our orientation.

We are made by the Creator;
we are made good;
within us is the capacity to be good,
for we are wonderfully – wonder-fully! – made.

Surrender, and Be Transformed

*"...the disciples came to Jesus and asked,
"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"
[Jesus] called a child, whom he put among them,
and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Christ knows better than anyone
that we are wonder-fully made, made good, made from love,
oriented to love and to live into God's grace on earth
and with God in heaven.

Christ also knows we need to change.

Change, He says to disciples, and become like a child:
innocent, open, fun-loving, curious, questioning,
hope-filled, living in awe of God's wonders,

Christ encourages us to invite Him into our changing lives.

Sometimes we need to change, need to be cleansed, become sanctified.

Sometimes we need to change from the inside out, to forgive and be forgiven.

Sometimes we need to be reoriented, renewed, resurrected,
born again, *anóthen*, from above.

Jesus is telling his followers if you want to be a Kingdom Builder,
we need to surrender to be changed, with the grace of God.

Surrender, and Be Transformed

The Apostle Paul went through enough changes to fill, what, 28% of the Bible,
nearly half the 27 books in the New Testament,
each tale and tome dealing with the changes he went through.

He bravely and honestly described changes he and his churches were going through,
transitions he made from sinner to saint to sinner to saint...

Speaking of changes, Paul said to the Romans and he says to us:

*"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.*

*Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

Be transformed by the renewal of your minds.

Do not be afraid.

God who made you wonder-fully, who orients your soul in goodness,
is with you in times of disorientation
to guide you to thrive into a renewed mind and life.

Surrender, and Be Transformed

The pace of changes around us is accelerated and accelerating.

In Alvin Toffler's prescient book, Future Shock, (1970)

he explores the cultural impact
of the accelerated rate of change we underwent
over last century and into our current age.

"Change is avalanching upon our heads," said Toffler,
"and most people are grotesquely unprepared to cope with it." (Toffler, P. 12)

Consider, if you will, just a few of the major changes
we've witnessed in the past 10 years alone.

20 years ago a sheep was cloned, and the baby lamb was named Dolly.

*A New Yorker cartoon depicts Dolly, the cloned sheep, all grown up,
looking in a mirror, wide-eyed, thinking, "I've become my mother."*

If we look in the rear view mirror and glance back over the past 10 years,
imagine the changes we had a front row seat to live through from 2010 to 2020:

- End of Great Recession
- Social Media Trends (*FaceBook, Twitter, etc.*)
- Growing Housing Affordability Issues
- Shift in Retail Trends

- Polarizing Politics
- Technology Changes
- Shared Economy (*Lyft, AirBnB, Shared Scooters, Shared Tools in Maker Space*)
- Expanding Equity Gap
- Climate Change

You know, what might be even more distressing than the pace of change
 is when we lose our faith, our confidence, our trust
 in the Divine in daily life,
 our sense of meaning to whatever is going on.

Honestly, more disorienting than the pace of change,
 is losing faith that there is a point to the changes we ourselves are going through;
 or, that we are getting anywhere, that there is movement and meaning.

Surrender, and Be Transformed

When I meet a seminary student,
 I tell him or her or them that in your first year of seminary
 “they” take your faith and shred it.

Everything you thought you knew and believed is shredded.
I mime shredding a sheet of paper.

Then in your second year,
 they toss the pieces in the air.
I mime throwing confetti skyward.

However, in your final year,
 you start to piece together your faith.
I mime plucking the pieces out of the air.

You have faith, only it’s different. And that is okay. You’ve been reoriented.

Sometimes we feel “up in the air”
 which is fine if it is endurable,
 if we know it has meaning, purpose,
 is part of a process in which we are not alone or bereft,
 a process of forward progress
 caught in God’s spiral
 moving and dancing and becoming
 toward something that is desirable.

Otherwise, my friends, change and transitions become simply distressful.

Been there.

Done that.

Bought the t-shirt.

You are not alone.

We covenant to walk together, all of us and the One who Created and Creates.

The transitions and changes we go through,

in ways great and small, vividly tangible and barely perceptible,
is a natural part of personal development
in body, mind and soul,
personally and communally.

We choose to view transitions
as “the natural process of disorientation and reorientation
that mark the turning points of the path of growth.” (Bridges, P. 5)

How many of us “experienced (1) an ending,
followed by (2) a period of confusion and distress,”
(of disorientation, of living in limbo, of being in a neutral zone),
“leading to (3) a new beginning” (Bridges, P. 9)
also known as a reorientation.

Throughout February
we will explore these stages, together,
considering strategies and spirituality
to help us to thrive through the transitions of our lives,
with the grace of God.

Surrender, and Be Transformed

We speak here of spirit-filled transitions and being transformed by God,
for we are a Trans People.

Trans is a Latin root word meaning across, beyond, through
Used as a prefix,

trans describes when something or someone
is changed thoroughly, altered,
made different than what it or we once were.

Transylvania University was founded further west than any college in its day
founded “over there,” “through the woods,” trans-syl-vania,
or, to put it in southern talk, o’er yonder.

To transcend is to rise above, to go beyond, eclipse, outshine.

To be transformed is to be reformed, renewed, remade in God’s image.

To be transfigured like Jesus was atop a high mountain
is to transform into something more beautiful or elevated,
to change, alter, to experience a metamorphosis.

We are a Trans people.

By the grace of the Creator,
we are transfigured,
living inside out, bedazzling Decatur and the ATL.

Surrender, and Be Transformed

Consider the natural world all around us and within.

“Throughout nature,
growth involves periodic accelerations and transformations:

Things go slowly for a time
and nothing seems to change—until suddenly
the eggshell cracks,
the branch blossoms...
the leaf falls...

With us it is the same.

Although the signs are less clear than in the world of feather and leaf,
the functions of transition times are the same.

They are key times in the natural process of self-renewal.” (Bridges, P. 5)

Sometimes things go slowly for a time,
and nothing seems to change—until suddenly the fog lifts and you see the light.

*Maybe for some folks, renewal is like playing a country music record backwards.
It stops raining, your pick-up truck runs, your mate loves you again,
and your dog comes back to you.*

Surrender, and Be Transformed

Overhear a story about a little river.

The little river said, *“I can become a big river.”*
It worked hard, but there was a big rock.
The river said, *“I’m going to get around this rock.”*
The little river pushed and pushed,
and since it had a lot of strength, it got itself around the rock.

Soon the river faced a big wall, and the river kept pushing this wall.
The growing river said, *“I can do it. I can push it.
I am not going to let down for anything.”*
Eventually, the river made a canyon and carved a way through.
Then there was an enormous forest.
The river said, *“I’ll go ahead anyway and just force these trees down.”*
And the river did.

The river, now powerful, stood on the edge of an enormous desert
with the sun beating down.
The river said, *“I’m going to go through this desert.”*
The hot sand soon began to soak up the whole river.
The river said, *“Oh, no. I’m going to do it.
I’m going to get myself through this desert.”*
The river soon had drained into the sand until it was only a small mud pool.
Then the river heard a voice from above:
“Surrender. Let me lift you up. Let me take over.”
The river said, *“Here I am.”*

The sun then lifted up the river and made the river into a huge cloud.

The sun carried the river right over the desert,
and let the cloud rain down and make the fields far away fruitful and rich.
There is a moment in our life
when we stand before the desert and want to do it ourselves.
There is the voice that comes,
"Let go. Surrender. I will make you fruitful. Yes, trust me. Give yourself to me."

What counts in your life and mine is not imagined successes;
what matters is the fruits we share, bless, dedicate.
The fruits of your life you might not see yourself.
The fruits of your life are born often in your pain
and in your vulnerability and in your losses.
The fruits of your life come only after the plow has carved through your land.

God, who created you, making something out of something,
who oriented you and declares you good,
wants you to be fruitful.

The question is in the face of the changes and transitions we face is not:
"How much can I still do in the years that are left to me?"

The question in the face of the changes and transitions we face is:
"How can I prepare myself for total surrender, so my life can be fruitful?"

In the eyes of the One who calls us the beloved, who made us out of something,
we are great--greater than the years we have.

Surrender.
Give in to God,
who calls you to thrive through the transitions of your life.

Thanks be to God!

We are a Trans People.

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