

Did you hear the one about the Zen master who ordered a hot dog? He told the vendor, "Make me one with everything." After the Zen master pays he says "Hey, where's my change?" And the vendor says, "Change comes from within." It's a good thing I'm just telling a joke, and not trying to summarize the actual teachings of Zen Buddhism, because we all know that change hardly ever comes from within. Navigating the changes that are thrown at us is simply the way life is. Jesus himself said, "Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black."

Some changes are welcome, even eagerly longed for. Others we deny, or fight with a variety of tactics. But we don't always know whether a change is good or bad. The leader of the synagogue in today's Gospel is easy to revile, but he couldn't have been all bad, or else he wouldn't have been chosen as the leader. And it's important to remember that while one of the few things everyone seems to agree on is that there are villains in the world, no one thinks they themselves are the villain.

We identify with Abel, and never Cain. Israel, and never Pharaoh and his armies. Elijah, and never the prophets of Baal. Jesus, and never any of his many enemies. And yet, we also know that we are sinners in need of God's forgiveness and salvation, and we rejoice that they are freely given. So when we read a Bible story, we get the most out of it when we consider the point of view of everyone in the story, even as we also try to remain attuned to what God is doing in the story.

The synagogue leader might be responsible for nothing more than not having his priorities straight. Protecting the integrity of Jewish law is a good thing. But the good thing is not the best thing. The whole point of the law is to keep God's people connected to God, and on that day in the synagogue, God showed up and made a change. In dramatic fashion, God changed the life of a woman, as well as everyone who witnessed the change.

But why this woman? There were certainly many others in need of healing. Well, there's a hint in the text. St. Luke editorializes and says the leader was "indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath," but the leader's own words are directed against the woman. He is addressing her when he says, "come on those days and be cured." The woman must have been marginalized by her ailment, despite God's special concern for the poor, the sick, and the suffering. Which is to say, the community or its leaders must have marginalized her, despite God's special love for her. Jesus would not let that stand.

The leader wasn't stupid. He must have known all this. Despite his outward sanctimony, he might inwardly have been torn between what he held dear and felt bound to uphold, and what, deep down, he knew was right. And yet, he needed a little help resolving that conflict. He reminds me of people today and in the recent past who are opposed to a change, but they know that coming out against the change directly will make them look bad, so they adopt the tactic of rejecting every method of implementing the change. Healing, but not here, not now. Civil rights, but not all at once. Equal

opportunity, but of course my department should be exempt. Justice, yes, but not like that. Affordable housing, but not there. Or there. Or there.

By comparison, the changes that happen in parishes are minuscule, but feelings can run just as hot. In a way, that's a good thing, as it can be evidence of deep devotion and genuine love. And indeed, I myself dislike ill-considered change and change for change's sake, especially in church. I know that the best way to make a child hate a certain food is to force them to eat it, and turn family meals, which should be a source of mutual comfort and joy, into a power struggle. And fortunately, you are not children, except those of you who are— and we love having children in church! Anyway, let me assure you, if you share your concerns with me, I will receive them with an attitude of openness, empathy, and respect.

In particular, I welcomed the Vestry's decision to begin restoring our two-service schedule on a trial basis after Labor Day. Since the decision was unanimous, I assumed the parish would welcome it enthusiastically. I also figured that modeling our services on our last example of a two-service Sunday, our Pentecost services, would go over well, since our Pentecost services were well-received and well-attended. "Great," I thought, "we have proof of concept." Further, a strategy of appealing to more people by offering two different worship experiences seemed logical, or at least worth a try.

Let me be clear, although rectors can make liturgical changes unilaterally, I have a strong preference for planning and implementing change by consensus. But that's only possible when I have good information. It's hard enough dealing with conflicting information, but what really drives me nuts is when I'm told that "lots of people" think or feel a certain way. If that's true, I need to know it right away. But here's the thing: a declaration of widespread but anonymous opinion is not information. Think about it: if you had a big decision to make, wouldn't you want more to base your decision on than one person telling you "people are saying you should do *that*... lots of people!"

Therefore, if you have an opinion or a concern to share on the proposed changes to our worship, I need to hear *from you*. Even, or especially, if your opinion is negative, or your concern is great, I will value your input immensely. Even if all you have to say is "I don't like" this or that, have the courage of your convictions and tell me. That would be much more helpful than invoking a nameless horde or telling someone who *might* tell me some version of what you told them, and I would be grateful for your candor. And of course if you're in favor, or have questions, or just want to give it a try, I need to know that too. But I need to know all these things now, not after the fact. It's kind of like how I refer to the act of voting as "renewing your license to complain," and remember, the primary is Tuesday. Anyway, people were not shy about voicing their opinions on our COVID policies, and even though those were all over the map, we got through it just fine, so I don't see why things need to be any different now.

I know that many people have had experiences that make them uncomfortable being so candid. Church is supposed to be, seem, and work differently from the world. If

we were no different from the world, what would be the point? And that's certainly true of power. Jesus had infinite power, and he saw a world that needed to be changed from top to bottom, but he used his power not to force, scare, or intimidate, but to teach, heal, and save, and that's the example for all Christians to follow.

Sometimes Jesus's teaching could be pointed, as in his response to the leader of the synagogue, but even then, he is determined to teach him and the crowd that the woman was worthy of respect. And although some crowds turned against Jesus, how much hope we find in the conclusion of this story: "the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." I have to hope that between that and Jesus's teaching and the miracle they all had just witnessed, the synagogue leader understood that God had acted, and that he too should rejoice. I hope that in accepting his newfound understanding, his soul was healed of its torment.

None of us is going to get everything right, all the time. We have to be gracious to each other, and open to what God might be doing in our midst. Jesus had already taught love of neighbor and even love of enemy, to anyone who would listen, but his final commandment to his inner circle of friends before his death was that they — that we — love one another. Every Christian should aspire to nothing less. And while both love and truth-telling can be challenging, they are two sides of the same, essential, coin.

That's why Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, who is also the comforter. Let's be honest, we would have no hope of living by Jesus's commandments without divine assistance. But with the Spirit, our relationship with God cannot be shaken. And the Spirit gives us far more than spiritual security.

With the Spirit, we can do the impossible, the miraculous. With the spirit, we can "come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant." In other words, we can come to church.

Because that is exactly what we do at every celebration of the Eucharist, regardless of the time, place, or manner in which it is celebrated. And Christians need to be reminded of the vastness of the Eucharistic miracle from time to time, in part because doing so keeps everything else in perspective, including us.

This side of heaven, we cannot perceive the miraculous change that happens in the Eucharist, yet this miracle, and not our perception of it, is the best and greatest change we encounter. The stories of Jesus healing people, especially people on the margins of society, give us a hint as to what God is doing for us in the Eucharist. We may fear change because we know from experience that the changes human beings make may be good or bad, but we may find comfort and joy by remembering that the changes God gives us are only, ever, to the good. Through the Eucharist, God heals our souls. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us

give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.”