

“Embracing Change”
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Luke 5:1-11

There is the saying, “The only thing consistent in life is change”, and it is never more true than in today’s world. Constantly and consistently, times are a-changing, our world is in a perpetual state of flux. But recently though, my entire foundation was shaken. The roots of my education and basic universal knowledge was shattered.

Pluto is no longer a planet.

This is a transformation of cosmic proportions, no pun intended. Dioramas are being dismantled, elementary school teachers are scrambling to rewrite text books, and solar system acronyms will never be the same. My very excellent mother just served us nine --- -- nine what? My fourth grade acronym is now useless.

Pluto is now a dwarf planet. Last time I checked, the term, dwarf, was politically incorrect. I’m sure there are better options. As NPR suggested, how about a planette, like kitchenette or dinette? Or maybe junior planet, like junior varisty, not ready to orbit with the big boys quite yet.

The loss of Pluto, a planet for only seventy-six years, is a right metaphor for the world today.

Losing Pluto as an official member of our solar system demonstrates how quickly change can come into our lives and challenge and disturb everything we thought we knew as stable and secure. This world of flux can bring about changes of immense hardship or overwhelming progress and joy.

When we face the loss of a loved one, a friend, or a co-worker, we are disoriented with grief and unsure of how to relate to the world without that other person. When national disasters such as Hurricane Katrina or Sept 11th happen, we realize that our illusion of control and safety is shattered. Even the most positive events can also evoke our vulnerabilities. When we find the one we want to marry, have our first child, begin a new career, or settle into retirement, our known world is transformed. What we thought we knew is now no longer true. To give a personal example, for the past twenty-five years, I was under the assumption that August was a summer month. But this past week of 60 degree, rainy, sweater-necessitating weather has completely disproved all my prior knowledge of August, well at least August in Massachusetts. This is the harsh reality of relocating to New England.

In our scripture reading today, we see the same pattern of change and the new reality that now awaits the disciples. The first disciples, Simon, James, and John are confronted with a miracle that shatters their prior understanding of what it meant to be fishermen. Simon

had been fishing all night and returned with nothing. He is exhausted, weary, and frustrated when he meets Jesus. Jesus, still a stranger to the disciples, asks Simon to set out again, to put out into deep waters. In the boat, Jesus continues to preach to the crowd at the shore and to Simon and his two other companions, James and John. Then Jesus requests that they cast their nets into the sea. Simon finally speaks up – “But master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing.” Simon is tired and doubtful, it doesn’t make sense and he knows the sea better than anyone, there are no fish to be caught. But he obeys anyway “ I will do as you say and let down the nets.” We as the readers do not know why Simon agrees. On a righteous level, we want to believe that Simon trusts Jesus. But then there is the other level, as I’m sure you’ve seen reflected in your children or spouse, when you ask them to complete a chore. “I’m only going to do it because you asked me to, not because I want to.” Or better yet, “I’ll do it, but I’ll only to prove you wrong.” Whether it is from trust or obligation or spite, Simon casts out the nets into the deep water.

Then, to Simon and the other disciples’ surprise, the boats begin to sink and the nets tear under the weight of their plentiful catch. They call for help, filling two boats full of fish. An abundance that they could have never been expected. The disciples are confronted now with a new reality, fishing is their expertise, but they are now out of their comfort zone. The truth and the rules by which they lived their lives have now been changed, by Jesus, a man they barely know. They could have chosen to ignore the strange incident and carry on with their normal lives, but instead, Simon, James, and John are transformed by their experience with Jesus and, here begins their discipleship.

So what about us? What happens when we are confronted with a new reality? How do we choose to react?

Ms. Fran Pavley, a middle school history teacher from California began to notice the increased amount of absences due to asthma each year. And instead of ignoring it, she did something about it. And more than anyone could have expected. After noticing the alarming trend in high absentee rates and more inhalers in school, she went to conferences and heard scientists say that global warming adds to the bad air quality. Pavley felt that this was a health concern for the state of California. Many of the elderly and children with asthma suffer terrible respiratory problems, especially on hot summer days when the air quality is at its worst. This was a problem Fran Pavley could not ignore. So, six years ago, Ms. Pavley became a California assemblywoman and a major player in environmental policy. Under Pavley’s recent bill, California is set to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels before 2020. It’s an ambitious goal but Pavley’s approach is to educate the public and legislature and to have California be a pioneer in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Pavley’s passion to stop global warming has resonated profoundly in California. And in fact, ten other states have copied her blueprint for cutting car and truck emissions. The 57-year old former teacher’s bill was even discussed at Kyoto. Jim Martson, who worked on the bill for the advocacy group, Environmental Defense remarked, “It was a freshman against the automobile industry. Come on – how could she win? And this little school teacher beat the industry.”¹

¹ “California Lawmakers Adopt Tough Climate Laws.” NPR: All Things Considered, August 31, 2006

Pavley noticed the destructive changes in the environment and how it was hurting the health of her students and she decided to act. Her action has set an example for others, as she used her passion for education and better air quality to bring about legislative changes. Pavley was a conduit for transformation.

The story of Fran Pavley inspires us to look at our own actions when faced with a new reality, whether it be an awakening to a societal ill, or a more personal realization. Often, we are confronted with changes that may be gradual, like failing health, or a splintering relationship, or overwhelming changes like relocation or a new career. But Jesus calls to us in those times, out in the deep waters, to embrace and to be transformed.

In scripture, we hear Jesus' promise of transformation to his disciples and all of us. When the disciples embrace the call of Jesus to follow him, Jesus promises the disciples that they should not be afraid because they will now be catchers of men. Often what comes to mind when we hear the phrase, "catchers of men" or "fishers of men" is an interpretation drenched with the evangelistic notion of saving souls.² This interpretation is incongruent with the rest of the Bible. Fishing metaphors are common in Scripture, in the Old and New Testaments. And specifically, this image of being fishers of men has strong linguistic ties to verses in Jeremiah, Amos, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel.³ In each of these contexts, the metaphor does not imply conversion but instead, transformation. In each of the cross references of being "fishers of men" or "the fished", the people are confronted with a harsh reality that they must not ignore. The text of Amos says that the Lord will take the first away with meat hooks and the last with fish hooks. It is a harsh and blatant confrontation with a destructive reality. So why would Jesus use this imagery of fishing men? I believe that Jesus uses the imagery of being fishers and the fished, in order to show that he and his disciples are being confronted with a new reality. Destruction does not need to preclude a new and hopeful beginning as it often does in the Old Testament, but instead, Jesus is the agent for the transformation. Jesus is the means for the in breaking of a new reality. Thus, I believe that Jesus uses this image of catching men not as a means for salvific action or as a suggestion of impending destruction. Instead, when Jesus calls Simon, James, and John to follow him and be catchers of men, he promises that will be transformed and transform others.

So what is this transformation that Jesus promises? And what is the goal of the transformation?

The transformation Jesus wants us to undertake is one in which we face the harsh reality of our present world and we ask ourselves how we can join God in bringing about a new reality based on justice, peace, and compassion. In Scripture this new reality is referred to as the Kingdom of God. And this Kingdom of God, or dream of God or vision of God, takes looking outside of the familiar, a willingness to embrace change, often radical change, and the courage to follow a vision for a new hope for our lives and for our world.

² Blount, Brian K. and Gary W. Charles. "Preaching Mark In Two Voices." Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

³ Jeremiah 16:16, Ezekiel 29:4, Amos 4:2, Habakkuk 1:14-15

There are many levels of transformation and a variety of ways that Jesus' vision for a new reality breaks into our lives. For Ms. Pavley, she started with a personal concern for the health of her students, which led to her work to transform the environmental reality of her state, which has now affected global treaties. For some of us, the transformation that we need to embrace has to do with having the courage to confront the nagging reality we've been wanting to ignore or deny in our own lives. It's different for all of us but none of us are outside the need for transformation. Whether it's confronting our addiction to alcohol, work, food, or television. Or it might have to do with facing the reality of our health problems and seeking the help we need. It might also have to do with simply admitting that we have a need for rest, a need for God, or a need for meaning in our lives. Whatever the reality in our personal lives we have tried to ignore, when we allow ourselves to be caught by Jesus, real transformation can take place in our lives.

Our church has been currently in the process of confronting the reality of what it means to be Hancock church today through the Listening Campaign. Through one-on-one conversations that many of you have participated in and the upcoming house meetings, we have an exciting new reality breaking forth. We as a church are working hard to ask ourselves –what is our purpose as a church? What is our vision for the future? In what ways do we want to serve as Christians? And what reality is the Gospel calling us to today? It's courageous to allow transformation; it takes lots of trust, and a secure sense that we are called to follow Jesus.

In a world of constant change, and with new realities facing us everyday in our personal and communal lives, we are reminded not to ignore Jesus' call to transform ourselves and this world into the present Kingdom of God. That with change comes opportunity.

So when we are compelled to reconcile our hopes with our disappointments or when we are pushed to face the truth in our homes and in our work, or when we are forced to deconstruct and reconstruct our universe because of changing circumstances and science, let us reflect and look within, listen to God, and find the strength and courage to embrace a new vision and hope for where we are headed. Amen.