

Living with Change

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, Director of Community Ministry,
at the eleven o'clock service, August 22, 2010: The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost.*

Based on Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 13:10-17.

In 1987, twenty-three years ago today, at 29 years of age, I came out to my parents as a gay man. I did it the best way I could. We lived almost 2,000 miles apart and so I told them on the phone. I told my parents together because of stories I had heard, stories about the parent first informed did not want their gay son or lesbian daughter to tell the other parent. I did not want to get caught in that triangle. I also did the best I could to manage my own expectations of their reactions. After all they were hearing this news for the first time. I couldn't expect them to hear the news, incorporate it, and congratulate me all in the same phone call. My mother said that she had always suspected and wondered if I should see a therapist. My father, very characteristically, said nothing at all, when I asked he said he was not happy but that of course he still loved me. This remark was memorable because it was the first time as a young adult that I heard my father state that he loved me. He had demonstrated his love in many ways but my father was not one to talk about his feelings. Overall my parents did rather well, but the thing that really surprised me and caught me completely off guard was my own reaction. After the initial joy of my secret truth being told there was disappointment. For you see although my life had changed it was still life. In the end I still had to take out the trash, go to work, and pay my bills. Upon reflection I realized that coming out can happen in a phone call but living your life in celebration requires a lifetime.

1997 was an amazing year. In January 1997 I was working in the Maricopa County HIV clinic to fulfill the field education requirement for my Master's degree in Social Work. At the end of 1996 the first drug cocktails for people with HIV/AIDS had been proven effective. Because

of these new medications my work consisted of enrolling people in the compassionate use programs of large pharmaceutical companies. Almost immediately people stopped dying. Those who had been infected went from being not dead yet to chronically ill almost overnight. For some it was only a short extension and others are happily still with us; but for all it was a transformation. Following the transformation, however, there was a lot of work to do. Lives had to be rebuilt, debts had to be paid, and people needed to find jobs, particularly jobs with good insurance. Life had changed but life was still life. New medications can change the course of an illness but living well with chronic illness requires effort.

One can imagine that the woman healed in this morning's Gospel lesson had a similar experience. After living for 18 years with an ailment that crippled her and made her unable to stand up straight, she encounters Jesus. Jesus called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. Her life had changed but life was still her life. After eighteen years she would need to figure out what it would mean to live standing up. As she regained flexibility and motion how would she relate to those who had pitied her? To those who had helped her? Would she look into their eyes or modestly at the ground? How would she interact with others who had not helped her? Miraculous cures happen in an instant, but living a healthy life is a lifelong project.

Recently while reading the contemporary liberation theologian Bruce Bawer I was reminded of a favorite story in Mark Twain's book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. There comes a moment when Huck Finn wonders about his role

in setting free Miss Watson's slave Jim. Things are not going well. Jim is a captive once again. Huck is unsure what to do and begins to think. "I thought till I wore my head sore, but I couldn't see no way out of the trouble."

And then Huck states, "It hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's slave that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now Providence was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout and ain't going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared."

And so in order to get right with God and avoid the everlasting fire Huck decides to write to Miss Watson and tell her where Jim can be found. After writing Huck says "I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life . . . But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell."

Before mailing his letter Huck thinks of Jim. "And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the nighttime, sometimes moonlight,

sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him but only the other kind." Huck remembers the ways in which Jim cared for him and what good friends they have been to each other. Huck then contemplates again the letter he has written to Miss Watson. "I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right, then, I'll GO to hell"—and tore it up."

We are called to liberate those who are oppressed and to heal those who are sick. We are called to be agents of change. We must remember that change can happen quickly but living into change takes a lifetime. We are called to set people free, we are called to be agents of healing but we are also called to be agents in the construction of a realm where none are oppressed and where none are sick. This is real change. The problem is that this type of change won't fit into the 24 hour news cycle, the congressional or even the presidential election cycle. This type of change takes a lifetime. Let us commit ourselves to this type of change in the name of the one who created life, who redeemed life, and sustains us throughout life. *Amen.*

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