

Thomas R. Cook
The Church of Saint Stephen the Martyr – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost; July 5, 2015

“Exciting Change”

Scripture: Mark 6:1-13; 6 Pentecost B, Proper 9; RCL

Is there anything harder than change, after all? I mean, even when change is good, it's a challenge, right? Because it's change. Our routines get shaken up. Our relationships may have to be realigned. The things we once counted on disappear, and things we once thought we knew for certain can be called into question. Change might be something as simple as losing that same spot in that same easy chair we always liked to sit in... or it may be as complicated as, say, calling a new priest from far away to live in your midst, nearly sight unseen, to be with you and guide you in shaping a faithful life, welcoming his family and helping them feel at home in a place that, for them, is entirely new, risking new relationships, and hoping for reassurance and friendship, joy and faithful purpose.

It is not lost on Britton and me the things that you have already done and the challenges you have already faced as a faith community just to bring us here and to welcome us so kindly to a new place and a new part of the body

of Christ. But it's not lost on us either that the change is not all our own; that you, the people of St. Stephen's Church, are also experiencing a time of change. And just as many of you have reached out to us to support us in this time, we want to support you as well through hearts open to new adventures, through our participation in the life of this parish, and by living day in and day out with faith that God is making us whole together and calling us to help others be well and whole.

And this is something we will do together, because we can't do it any other way. So, when Jesus takes a trip back to his hometown, I'm sure he was expecting a hometown welcome. After all, he was just coming off a pretty impressive miracle tour, having cast out demons, healed sick people, and brought a little girl back to life. People were starting to take notice of this man from that little backwater town of Nazareth. And it seems that things were off to a good start. News of his ministry had gotten back to his family and friends. And when he came to town, the people sounded impressed. *"Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"* And I'm expecting the scripture to say something like: "And they

were amazed and proud of him for what he was doing.” But it doesn’t. Instead it says “...they took offense at him.” That must have hurt.

Change is hard. Jesus is stirring things up. My guess is many of the townspeople thought he was getting “a little too big for his britches,” as my mom used to say. This was the little guy who grew up there with them. He was a common carpenter, the son of a carpenter. Maybe he wasn’t the favorite of some of them. Maybe he was the kid who left his dad’s tools at a job somewhere for anybody to steal. Maybe some thought he was precocious or spoiled by a protective mother who treated him like he was better than their kids. Who knows? But the change was hard. And many could not accept Jesus in his new role. And Jesus was “...amazed at their unbelief.” (Though I think maybe some of it could have been expected.) But what it meant, this challenge of change, was that those amazing things Jesus had been doing out there in the larger world, he could not do at home with a people who wanted none of it. He couldn’t force them to believe something they would not. He couldn’t make them change according to *his* will. And I think that he was sad when he said: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." (Of course, you may note my strategy of coming to be with you 1500 miles from my hometown in Florida.)

In the end, we are called to be partners with Jesus and partners with one another and our broader church in bringing about change that is good for this world. And we do this by paying attention to those few things that really do not change for us as Christians, namely:

- Our call and promise to risk loving everyone as children of God, made in the image of God, respecting the dignity of every human being.
- Our call and promise to look beyond ourselves and find ways we can give away our lives for others in order that we may find our lives as God would have them be. As the Baptismal Covenant says: “...to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.”
- Our call and promise to live our lives in ways that reveal God’s love for this world.

Look, I’m not telling you the world will always want what we have to offer. I’m not even telling you that *we* will always want to accept all the changes and challenges that God may put before us while shaping us to the ministry that St. Stephen’s Church will hold for the future. But I am saying that we are called to risk change and challenge together in order that we might be vessels of God’s grace and deeds of power.

But this is not new to St. Stephen's Church, I expect. When I was discerning a call to ministry with you, it frequently came to mind that "St. Stephen's Church" is the abbreviation, if you will, the shorter form of referring to this gathered faith community. Our full name, our formal name, is "The Church of Saint Stephen the Martyr." It is Saint Stephen who first witnessed to the power of love revealed to the world in Jesus Christ, even at the cost of his life. It is Saint Stephen who acknowledged the change come into the world through Jesus. It is Saint Stephen who accepted that Jesus crosses barriers that separate humankind and asks us to do the same. It is Saint Stephen who forgave those who took his life.

The word "martyr" comes from the Latin for "witness." The Church of Saint Stephen the Martyr is a contemporary witness to the love of God in this world and the power of God in this world that does not change, even though all around us does. Even though sometimes we must.

But after all, is there anything more exciting than faithful and loving change? I'm excited for this new ministry with you and looking forward to what God has in store for us.