

Changing Minds

We continue this week, standing by the side of the Jordan River.

Marveling at the prophet.

Hip deep in muddy water.

As he implores and exhorts and commands each of us to do one thing.

It is perhaps the most difficult thing for any human being to do.

It takes great humility.

It takes a willingness to reject the demands of ego.

It takes a desire to be brutally honest with oneself.

And what is that one thing that John insists upon?

It's that we change our minds.

About ourselves.

About human nature.

And about God.

About who we are.

And what we believe.

Talk about a challenge!

And yet, in the two millennia that separate us from John, one would think that learning how to change our minds might be easier.

After all, isn't humanity on this upward trajectory?

Toward greater understanding?

Progress?

And insight?

Aren't we evolving into something better than we were?

Clearly not if we just read the headlines in the morning paper, or tune into the evening news.

"Us against them" has people in Texas talking seriously about seceding from the union.

Florida is working on its own state sponsored paramilitary that isn't answerable to the federal government.

All while "purity of thought" seems to be taking over the mindset of our friends on the left, who are too often quick to ignore, berate or dismiss those who don't parrot whatever the correct verbiage of the day demands.

Somehow, in John's day and in ours, the mere thought of "changing our minds" has come to mean some kind of dishonorable surrender, an inexcusable weakness of character.

And yet, here is the prophet of God this morning, insisting that we do just that.

Why?

The wonderful novelist, Octavia Butler, wrote that "God is change."

Which may shake up most of our conceptions about an Unchanging, Unmoved, Mover of All That Is.

A notion that perhaps we subconsciously apply to ourselves — which may explain our reluctance to change our minds.

If God doesn't change, why should I?

As Fr Rohr observes, how we understand God pretty much dictates how we understand ourselves.

So let's walk together for a moment and consider whether God is indeed change.

That God embraces change.

Desires change.

So much so that the very nature of God IS change.

We don't have to look far.

It's there in the first reading!

"The Lord has taken away the judgments against you..."

Whose judgments?

God's!

"I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it."

Who sent the disaster?

God!

"I will change their shame into praise..."

"I will ... restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord."

For the Jewish people, God is constantly changing.

God changes as Abraham argues about the destruction of Sodom and Ghamorrah ("What if we find 50 honest men, 40, 30, 20, 10?").

It's there when Moses urges God not to wipe out the Israelites who worshipped the golden calf.

It's there as Jesus comes face to face with the Syro-Phoenician woman.

You remember her!

She's begging for a cure for her daughter, and Jesus dismisses her with:

"The children need to eat before the dogs!"

Only to change his mind.

If we can begin with an open-minded acceptance that God IS change, then what does that imply for ourselves, our nation, and our world?

For ourselves, it gives us permission to embark on that necessary step in spiritual development: a searching and fearless moral inventory.

If God is change, and therefore we who are made in the image of God are also meant to change, we can't do that without first coming to see who we are.

A searching and fearless moral inventory is where that happens.

It's a clear-eyed look at both my gifts, goodness and skills — as well as my foibles, failures and defects of character.

It's facing the fact that we are each of us put on this earth with gifts, goodness and skills — along with foibles, failures and defects of character.

All of us.

Despite the howling of my ego that I'm the special one!

Exempted from humanity's common lot.

It's like death.

Everyone knows that everyone dies.

Except, I'm pretty sure that I'm that one exception!

Accepting our common condition can make it a bit safer to dive into my particular FFD's.

(Foibles, failures and defects!)

Can I spend time considering how I am so very like the people in my life whom I most despise?

Particularly when those people are a parent or close relative or former spouse?

Because only when I can see and accept the hard truths about myself, can I take the necessary step — and change.

Change isn't about change for the sake of change.

Healthy change, saving change, “allows us to bend more easily toward love, justice, mercy and grace.” Christian Century, 11/17/21, 29.

It’s like that wonderful line that has Jesus speaking to the religious leaders.

“You use scripture to determine what love means.”

“I use love to determine what scripture means.”

The first reduces love to something small and legalistic.

The second expands scripture so that all might feel welcome.

Changing our minds frees us to live life in a way that welcomes growth and diversity, insight and joy.

Changing our minds allows us to at long last see that the judgment we fear will be so frightening, so destructive, is, on closer examination, the healing and redeeming judgment of love, mercy, and compassion.

That’s why judgment is truly a refining fire.

Because it refines.

It doesn’t destroy.

It purifies the chaff of defensiveness, the dross of self-justification.

When these are burned away, we are left with the genuine, trusting, grateful spirit that always was and always is alive and well at the center of every human being.

Even Trump.

Even Clinton.

Because, the purpose of God's judgment is not to punish.

It's to heal.

If only we will allow it.

Changing our minds about all we think we know allows us to finally see this great truth!

That the gift of God's judgment, God's healing, is that it removes from us our illusions of grandeur.

Our self-justifying excuses.

Our blindness to cruelty and shame.

That the great gift of God's judgment, God's healing, at long last frees us from our slavery to anger and fear.

To bigotry and hate.

Frees us to embrace every human person as a beloved sibling in Christ.

God's judgment, God's healing, erases ego and pride.

Burning away everything that separates us from God.

Leaving only that which is of God in us.

So that we may finally rest in God.

So that we might finally become one with God.

As one fellow puts it:

“As far as inner transformation is concerned, there is nothing you can do about it.

You cannot transform yourself.

And you certainly can't transform your partner.

But what you can do is create a space for transformation to happen.

For grace and love to enter.” E. Tolle, modified.

Creating that space is the great call of John the Baptist this morning.

And creating that space begins with changing our minds.

How many of you, like me, are tired of old and destructive patterns in your life?

As I have grown older, I've recognized that there are defects in my personality that I've worked really hard to eliminate.

But they are still there.

Causing me — and others — all kinds of trouble and pain.

Which is why passing through the refiner's flame is something to welcome.

Because this pathway from judgment to joy will finally consume my many defects of character.

Because our Lord's piercing, yet gracious judgment, will at long last heal my wounds!

As we prepare for the day when we all of us, healed, restored, and redeemed, shed tears of thanksgiving for the grace of judgment!

A judgment that is the pathway to joy.

The joy awaiting those willing to change their mind.

+amen.