

“Changing Your Life”

Matthew 3:2 & 4:1-11 & 17

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February 26, 2023

Prayer for Understanding Holy God, Listening is always easier said than done. We shuffle into this space and try to quiet our minds, but the list of distractions is long. We need your help to listen. So today we ask that you would marinate us in your Word. Dust the cobwebs from our ears. Stir our souls awake. Crack open our hearts to make room for you. Scoop us up. Put us in your pocket. Carry us with you wherever you go.

We want to hear you, really hear you, so speak to us now. With hope we pray, amen.

I have always been inspired by my father’s compassion, generosity, peacemaking, and stewardship. When I was young, I thought that my father was sometimes too generous, that people were taking advantage of him. As my economics education grew, I saw how he often relinquished profit for stewardship.

At seminary one semester, I had an ongoing intense debate with a fellow seminarian who had previously worked as a counselor and social worker. He argued that human behavior is predictable and passed on to future generations, that without enforced corrections, mandated therapy, and an active support group, people cannot change. He argued that once a person is damaged they will never fully heal, that a person’s past experiences bind them into a certain course through life. I countered with every fiber of my being that anyone can change and heal, that each person is free to make choices.

As I was reflecting on one of our intense debates, I realized that my belief in change, healing, and freedom was modeled and instilled by my father. My father believed that true farmers were stewards of the land. He believed it was the duty of a farmer to pass the land onto the next generation in fertile condition. Even if it would result in economic ruin, my dad would choose maintaining the fertility of the land over profit. We used organic fertilizers, rotated crops, installed grass waterways, planted windbreaks, and maintained native buffer foliage around the lake. When a nearby farm went bankrupt my dad bought it. The land had been abused. Anhydrous ammonia, a cheap fertilizer, was overused to grow only corn. As a result, there were few earthworms and soil microbes. The land was suffering from washout erosion. The soil was plowed year after year in the fall leading to wind erosion and a hardpan which increased soil compaction resulting in a loss of soil structure. The first thing we did was to use a subsoiler to break up the hardpan. We planted sweet clover for the sole purpose of healing the land. We planted wind breaks and installed erosion controller measures in the waterways. We let the land rest for an entire year. We tilled the sweet clover into the soil to increase organic matter and welcome back earthworms and soil microbes. Next, we planted barley as a cover crop for alfalfa. Slowly the land healed. It took five years for us to harvest enough from the land to cover the costs of our healing work for the land. We lost a lot of money on this land as it wasn’t until year six that we were able to start paying back the initial cost of the land. The joy was in being able to restore the fertility of this land and pass on the fertility to future generations.

My Dad gave hurt and sick animals numerous opportunities to get well resulting in a far above average veterinary bill. We maintained a building that served as an animal hospital with comfy straw, climate control, a sling, and a dirt floor. The sling consisted of material that we would pull under the animal and attach to a hoist to lift up animals with milk fever or an injured leg. It may sound simple. It is not simple to get material under a 1300 pound animal working by their four legs. The animal often didn’t realize we were helping and kicked. A dirt floor provides the best traction for the animal but it requires more labor as it needs to be hand cleaned. The cows had to be hand milked. Nursing animals back to health was labor intensive. Often my dad would get up at 4 am instead of 4:30am to care for the injured animals. He talked to them and rubbed them. Before bed, he would take a flashlight and care for them again. My Dad nursed numerous animals back to health.

My Dad had a reputation for giving young adults who were in trouble a job with room and board. A few of them stole from us and disappeared. Most changed, healed, and discovered a meaningful, joyful path as a good citizen. My dad was a great listener. Every day we worked in close proximity milking cows. Often a new troubled employee would vent, complain, and rant. My dad listened for hours. Usually, he would say just a few words, asking profound questions. A great aspect of the venting, anger phase was they usually got assigned jobs like forking out manure and shoveling feedstuffs, their frustrations caused them to do it quickly.

A short tangent here, my dad changed my behavior through farm chores. My parents set clear expectations. When I broke an expectation, my Dad would say, “Since you made a choice to, whatever I should or should not have done, you made a choice to get up early and do whatever least desirable job was needed that day.”

My Dad had a great sense of timing. There was usually a progression of listening to a person vent, asking questions, emphasis that a person can make different choices, exploring options, affirming their abilities, lots of compliments on work done well and an abundance of encouragement.

When my parents were told that I was retarded, they sought another opinion. When they were told I would never make it beyond 5th grade, they taught me after school.

After one of the debates with this fellow student who was adamant that people rarely change, I realized how my dad devoted his life to good change. I suddenly realized the wonderful gift my dad had given me. I was also struck by how our experiences influence our perspectives. As a social worker, this fellow student spent his days with mostly people who kept making the same destructive choices, people who lacked the support to change, people who lacked an awareness of God being an agent who is eager to make good change happen for each person. This is one facet that motivated me to become a pastor who helps people experience grace.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a season of change, a time to examine your life, to identify life diminishing aspects and repent, turn, change, to life enhancing aspects. You are not alone. The Holy Spirit is within you. Breathe, life, love, peace, joy, creativity, grace, is within you. God is eager to change, redeem, renew, renovate, resurrect you, everyone, and the entire cosmos to glorious perfection.

Almost every story in the Bible is one of profound change. A pattern is repeated over and over again. A person, or group of people, make horrible, destructive choices. God’s grace forgives, heals, and offers a fresh start. The person, or group, with the help of God’s love changes and becomes more loving and joyful.

There are over one hundred scripture verses that encourage us to repent and believe. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by proclaiming, **Matthew 3:2 NRSV “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** Another translates states. **Matthew 3:2 NLT “Turn from your sins and turn to God, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”** And another translation states. **Matthew 3:2 MSG “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.”** God’s kingdom is glorious beyond our grandest imagination. Jesus shared numerous parables in hopes of giving us a glimpse of God’s transformational love that is changing everyone and everything making all eternally magnificent.

Jesus began his ministry with the same one sentence message. Jesus repeated it over and over, illustrated and modeled it. **Matthew 4:17 MSG “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.” Matthew 4:17 NLT “Turn from your sins and turn to God, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” Matthew 4:17 NRSV “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

Fully human Jesus came to prove that every person can change and that every person will change with the help of resurrection grace. Humanity has a long history of making destructive choices. Jesus begins his ministry by showing us how we can change to be fully good, whole, loving and in harmony with all people and the cosmos.

Matthew 4:1-11 NRSVA “Then Jesus was led up by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards Jesus was famished. The tempter came and said to Jesus, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But Jesus answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’ Then the tempter took Jesus to the holy city and placed Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to Jesus, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “God will command God’s angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ Jesus said to the tempter, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ Again, the tempter took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and the tempter said to Jesus, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to the tempter, ‘Away with you, tempter! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.”’ Then the tempter left Jesus, and suddenly angels came and waited on Jesus.”

God has promised to never leave or forsake us. God has promised to be with us always. God is grace. Every poor choice is forgiven. Every hurt is healed. Every moment is a fresh start, pure, with endless possibilities for change, goodness, joy, and love.

Pastor Danielle Shroyer wrote: “Before we can embark on a life of wisdom—one that requires us to choose, over and over again, between using our words and actions as poison or medicine—we must allow our naive innocence to die. This same choice comes to Jesus as he wanders the wilderness. Will he use his gifts as a parlor trick or a sacred balm? Will he use his glory for fame or for peace? Will he use his power for domination or for equality? Jesus shows

us the way by choosing medicine, every time. And as he does so, he teaches us what we all need to know as we fumble toward wisdom. When he refuses to turn bread into stone, it is because he knows his gifts and abilities are in service to something far greater than hunger. When he refuses to test God, it is because he already trusts God. And when he refuses the kind of loyalty that leads to worldly authority, it is because he knows power is meant for connection and not domination. Jesus knows all of this because he has been listening. Day after day, he dwells with his Divine Parent. He embodies the teachings he has received in the Temple, on his mother's lap, in his father's shop. Jesus shows us what it looks like to walk in wisdom, to become adept at parsing out the many voices that call for our allegiance. If we are to be like Jesus, we also must begin by first listening to the voice of God at our center. This voice tells us, above all and after it all, we are God's Beloved. When we know this, we filter out so much of the silt and grit that traps us. We release ourselves into the arms of love. We make space for the work of transformation to be born in us. As you begin this Lenten journey, consider what voices might be pulling you toward more poison than medicine. Carve out time for silence, that the still, small voice of God may come into fuller focus. Listen for God, who is always there, right at the center of your heart, inviting you into a life of belovedness as you travel."

To overcome the temptations Jesus let go of selfishness and embraced loving all. Scripture says. **"The tempter came and said to Jesus, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But Jesus answered, 'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"** Later Jesus becomes the bread of life for everyone, much more than satisfying his personal hunger Jesus satisfies everyone's hunger, provides every need.

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Scripture says: **Again, the tempter took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and the tempter said to Jesus, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'** Jesus said to the tempter, **'Away with you, tempter! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God."** This is the temptation of keeping resources to yourself, using the land, using people, seeking control instead of consensus, community, and harmony. Later Jesus becomes the king who gives the kingdom of God to everyone.

All of these temptations are overcome with a change from one to all. Depending on what voices you are listening to, it may seem like change is impossible that that every person will never be whole, joyful, and loving. There are numerous voices that say humanity will never come back together as one united, loving family. God's voice proclaims, change, the kingdom of God, is here, right now, changing all to goodness. The fallen cosmos will become vibrant. War will change to peace. Scarcity for some will change to abundance for all. There will be change in you and in your enemies, making you friends. Your grief will change to resurrection. Your hurts will change to wholeness. All that diminishes life will change to enhancers of life. The voice of God proclaims the good news of good change. God listens. God lets us vent. God even listens to our anger, frustrations, and "whys" that one screams at God because often this is the way of change. God invites us to get it all out, so we can listen to God. Hearing that we are beloved, we belong, we have unique gifts, we are created in God's image capable of creating, loving, rejoicing like God. God continually pours grace into every life. God gives each of us the ability to choose, the ability to change. Lent is a time to communicate with God and make good changes. Examine your life. Identify ways to become more loving, more joyful, more grateful, more whole, more wonderful, more good, and change. God is eager to help change you. Lent is an invitation to be open and curious. God will expand the majesty of the cosmos through you. God will expand love and joy for eternity through you. Amen