



Changing Hearts and Minds

September 27, 2020: The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh LORD: May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard. In the Name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. Amen.

This is a sermon about changing our minds. Always a difficult task.

Even more so these days, when many of us have hunkered down on our opinions and beliefs. The passing of the iconic Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett as her successor comprise only the most prominent, current opportunity for us to double down on our convictions and preferences.

According to much of the literature on the topic of changing minds, providing facts doesn't help. We are all practitioners of confirmation bias—that trait we display when we resist accepting facts which don't confirm what we already think. Confirmation bias can even lead to the discovery of alternative facts which allow us to keep thinking what it is that we are comfortable thinking, and especially, feeling.

Our Gospel and Epistle this morning challenge us to ask God for help to change our minds and hearts. In the Gospel, Jesus has already entered Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey to the hosannas of his followers. He has upset the tables of the money changers in the Temple, leaving the authorities astonished and angry.

After a night away in Bethany, he is now back in the Temple precincts teaching right in the heart of the religious establishment. Imagine Jesus' moxie, heading back to area where he had just caused such a ruckus. And there he is *teaching*, no less, right in the face of those who felt their power most threatened. The chief priests and elders question Jesus' credentials. Discerning the defensiveness and hostility beneath their question, he responds to their question with a question of his own and stymies their attack.

Jesus then tells a brief parable about two sons and their father, who asks them to work in the vineyard. One son says, "No dad, I won't go," but eventually does; the other son says, "Sure dad," but doesn't go.

The elders give the right answer as to who does the will of the father.

But then, not to put too fine a point on it, Jesus suggests that while the chief priests and elders *claim* to be doing God's will, they in fact *ignore* God's call to repentance through the ministry of John; and while the tax collectors and prostitutes, whose lives *seem* to say no to the commands of God, they do in fact answer "yes" to God's call to repentance, to a change of life and mind, through the ministry of John.

The first son changed his mind. The tax collectors and prostitutes changed their minds.

The second son and the elders and chief priests—not so much.

The Greek under the English words "changed mind" is actually a bit more specific. It means more literally "to change what one cares about," or "to change what one is most concerned about." Less

literally, but more to the point, it gives the sense of having a change of heart.

(<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt21x23.htm>, accessed September 26, 2020)

And that is really what Jesus is about. Leading us into changes of heart.

Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi exhorts us to have the same mind as the mind of Christ: a mind without selfish ambition; which in humility regards others as better than ourselves; that looks not only to our own interests but the interests of others. But even here, the Greek words under the English word for "mind" are connected to a word with the root meaning of midriff, diaphragm, parts of the heart. It's minds and hearts that Jesus is after. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/phren.html>

The letter goes on to say that Jesus set aside his equality with God, emptied himself, to become one of us, to change our hearts. Changing hearts, changing minds. God knew what God was doing in sending Jesus. It's proximity that changes hearts and minds. As our hymn says this morning, "What wondrous love is this, that the Lord of bliss would lay aside his crown for soul." Would come to be with us.

Jesus was about God getting close to us. Breaking bread. Hanging out. Opening up the meaning of the Scripture. Befriending the friendless. Teaching. Healing. Laying down his life for his friends.

There is something about real proximity, which we of course are missing so much right now, physical nearness, not Facebook nearness, that increases the possibility of changed hearts and minds. Not always. But without it, changed hearts and minds are not possible.

I don't need to tell you that we are in a time when we desperately need changed hearts and minds. Not the same mind and heart—that's not possible in our civic society—but hearts and minds that can pull in the same direction, that can acknowledge our common humanity.

Think about those times when our minds have changed. It may have taken a long period of time to go from thinking and feeling one way to thinking and feeling another. Changing one's heart and mind can be as simple and as difficult as going from thinking someone of another political persuasion is wicked and immoral and an existential threat to our country, to accepting that the person perhaps even shares with us some of the same basic human longings and dreams.

Consider the road trip of Greg Smith and Kouhyar Mostashfi.

Greg Smith is a retired police chief and construction worker from rural southwest Ohio. He is a devout evangelical Christian and fervent Trump supporter. Mostashfi, on the other hand, is an Iranian immigrant who works as a computer engineer in suburban Dayton, Ohio and is an active member of the local Democratic Party. Greg and Kouhyar drove together from Ohio to Virginia to attend a national convention of Braver Angels, a group that works to depolarize our national life. Their friendship had already begun to grow after they visited each other's place of worship. During that road trip, they hashed



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out weighty issues – agreeing to disagree on abortion while finding common ground on guns. That’s a significant change of heart and mind. <https://braverangels.org/abc-nightline-on-better-angels/>
Or I think of my own journey in my attitudes toward gay people in the Church. Over a period of years, I went from thinking that gay Christians should commit to a lifetime of celibacy, to joyfully presiding at a wedding Eucharist for two men with whom I had sung, laughed, worked in the Church, and broken bread.

What changed my mind and my heart? Proximity. Listening. Honest Conversation. Reading. Study of Scripture. Laughter. Prayer. Friendship. Meals. Common Worship. Christian Community. Now, I don’t intend the sharing of this aspect of my Christian journey as some form of performative, progressive virtue signaling. Even in liberal Massachusetts, there may be people listening right now who are offended by what I’m saying. And I know that there are untold numbers of Christians who believe that I, and millions of Christians who happen to be gay, or transgender, or otherwise gender non-conforming, are wrong. In fact, I know some of them and have worshipped with them.

All this to say that minds and hearts can be changed, opened, softened; not perfectly, but in ways that align with the constant love of Christ, which is always pushing us to grow larger hearts. That is part of our salvation. Allowing our minds and hearts to be changed is not easy. But we don’t do it alone. Paul tells us this morning that, on the one hand, we are working out our salvation—the changing of our hearts—with fear and trembling; AND that *God* is at work in us, enabling us to will and to work for *God’s* good pleasure.

I came across a writer named James Clear the other day who had this to say about changing minds and hearts: Be kind. Be right later. Arguing and winning, being right, does a kind of violence to another person. If your desire is to be connected, be kind first. Be right later. He then suggests another way to think of changing minds and hearts, ours as well as others: Develop a friendship. Share a meal. Gift a book.

<https://jamesclear.com/why-facts-dont-change-minds>

Sounds like the beginning of being a Christian.

Amen.