

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Transfiguration of Our Lord • February 23, 2020

Exodus 24:12-18 • Psalm 2 • 2 Peter 1:16-21 • Matthew 17:1-9

We live in a culture that is obsessed with growth. We seek economic growth. Bumps in the stock market, ticks up in GDP, Dow 25,000. We talk lots about personal growth. For our high schoolers who are applying to college, the standard admissions question isn't *What do you know?* but *How have you grown as a person?*

But when we pursue growth at all costs, we can end up in very strange places. If your primary goal is economic growth, the temptation will be to run roughshod over human rights and the environment. *Yea, the playground is a superfund site, but look at the new jobs report.* If your primary goal is personal growth, the temptation will be to do what's advantageous or fulfilling for you instead of what your neighbors actually need. *Don't think of what service the people in your community would benefit from, think of what would look good on that college essay.* Sometimes our obsession with growth, with improvement, and with change takes us in exactly the wrong direction.

And, of course, we do the same thing with church. We think that for the church to be doing well, it has to be growing. It has to be acquiring. It has to be acquiring more people or acquiring more money or acquiring more status. I don't think many of us would explicitly say that's what we mean when we talking about growing. But that's usually our default way of thinking. When people ask how the church is doing, they usually don't mean how relationships are developing among members and how community partnerships are improving the life of our neighborhood. They mean Advent 25,000.

The ways we talk about growth and change are especially important because at our annual meeting last month, you adopted a new mission statement that begins with the word "grow." "Growing in faith through worship, learning, and serving together." It's a good mission statement. I didn't write it, but I like it. But it does leave us to unpack exactly what it is we mean by growth and change.

So is there a way to talk about growth and change without falling into one of those unhealthy impulses? The good news is that there is. For the past two thousand years or so, people within the church have been thinking theologically about the importance of change and growth. The bad news is that they have come up with two seemingly contradictory ideas.

The first idea is that to be brought into relationship with God, to receive God's grace, to be called a child of God, to be redeemed, to be justified, whatever language you want to use, you don't need to change at all. Who you are right now is who God wants to be in relationship with. You do not need to change anything about yourself to convince God to be in relationship with you. You don't need to make a confession of faith. You don't need to sign a piece of paper. You don't need to have some kind of special experience. Who you are right now is who God wants to be in relationship with.

The churchy word we use for this is "grace." We often talk about grace like it's a thing. Like it's a noun. But it's really an adjective. It's a way of describing our relationship with God. And it's basically just saying that that relationship is not something that depends on me. My relationship with God isn't contingent on my income, my culture, my gender, my family, my heritage, my sexuality, my health, my housing status, or any other thing. It depends on God. The upshot of this is that I don't have to change who I am or become any less me to be in relationship with God.

The second idea is that being in relationship with God will change everything. There are lots of examples in the gospels of people who want to be in relationship with Jesus but find the change it requires too difficult. The rich man who wants to follow Jesus but won't sell his possessions. The

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man who wants to follow Jesus but asks to bury his father first. The change that relationship with God requires is not just inconvenient or undesirable but as cutting to the very heart of your own self-understanding. The change that being in relationship with God requires is often presented as insurmountable. It's not an accident that in the early church, many baptismal fonts were designed to look like coffins. The symbolism suggested that change of being brought into the body of Christ was a kind of death. You joined Christ in death and were raised to new life with him. How deep does the change of being brought in relationship with God go? As deep as your entire existence.

So is there any way to square those two ideas? Being in relationship with God doesn't require us to change at all and being in relationship with God changes us so profoundly that we can only understand it in terms of death and new life? There is. But it requires us to start not from our thinking about the economy or the Common Application or the church or ourselves but from God.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up to a mountain to pray. And Jesus, Matthew says, "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." Not long after, a voice from a cloud says, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." "Transfigured" comes from the Greek *metemorphothe*, meaning "changed." As in "metamorphosis." So the story of the transfiguration is a story about change.

But has Jesus actually changed? Well, it depends whose perspective you take. If you are watching this from Peter, James, and John's perspective the answer is yes. Obviously. Jesus isn't walking around in dazzling white robes most days. But if you are watching this scene from the divine perspective? No. Nothing has changed at all. This is who Jesus always is. Jesus has always been God's beloved. Jesus has always been, as the creed puts it, light from light. What's new here is not that Jesus has become God's beloved. What's new is that now Peter, James, and John know it, too. They get a glimpse, a preview of who Jesus actually is.

In other words, the transfiguration is not a story about Jesus becoming something he's not. It's a story about Jesus becoming what he already is in the eyes of God. If this story feels like an Easter story to you, there's a reason for that. It's about Peter, James, and John taking on God's resurrection point of view. From one perspective, nothing has changed. But from another perspective, everything has changed.

So when we talk about change, when we talk about growth, we are never simply talking about growing in the way the stock market grows or changing in the way naturally people change into something different over time. We are talking about growing into relationship with Jesus and recognizing, realizing, and claiming that what God says about Christ is also what God says about us. So that the very ground of our being becomes manifested in our relationships and communities. We are talking about people becoming who they truly are as they grow into their identity in Christ.

What would change if we ditched some of our obsession with growth and began focusing on transfiguration? If instead of focusing on acquiring more, we focused on taking on God's resurrection point of view? For one, it would drastically reshape how we think about our economic life. It would help us understand that markets are a tool for human flourishing, not the other way around. It would deeply reshape how we think about personal growth. Not as achieving more things to try to construct an identity and sense of self but an uncovering of the truest and most integral things about ourselves. And it would drastically reshape how we think about our calling as the church. Instead of evaluating the worth of our common life based on numbers, we could judge them based on how well they build relationships that help us grow in faith and love.

When our mission statement talks about growing, I think that's what it's talking about. I don't think it's talking about getting more members or getting more money or getting more whatever. At least I certainly hope it's not. I think it's about how we help one another live as transfigured people, as people who help one another grow into Christ so that the source of our life

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becomes its end. So much of our anxiety about our common life comes from our striving to fulfill a mission we haven't been given. Our calling is not to acquire more, to stockpile resources in the name of progress, or to reclaim the conveniences of Christendom. But to help reveal the light of Christ that shines within each of us.

And that brings us all the way around. We gather together around font, word, and table not to become better people, not to improve, not to make progress, but to become transfigured. A people who become a little more like the body of Christ when they trust that they and their neighbors are God's beloved. A people who are given just a little glimpse of God's promised future and sent out from this table down the mountain into the wilderness.

What would that kind of transfigured body inspiring, strengthening, and giving hope actually change? From one perspective, it would change nothing. But from another perspective, from a transfigured perspective, it would change everything.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor