

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

The famous 20th century Christian author, Henri Nouwen, wrote a book called *Spiritual Direction* and in it he writes about this crew of flying trapeze artists named the Flying Rodleights. He said, "I will never forget how enraptured I became when I first saw the Rodleights move through the air, flying and catching each other as elegant dancers. One day," he said, "I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, 'As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump. The flyer does nothing, and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and my hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely up.'

"'You do nothing?' I said, surprised. 'Nothing,' Rodleigh repeated. 'The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.'" Well, I don't know about you, but the thought of letting go of a perfectly good trapeze swing and flying for the air with arms outstretched, leaving it up to someone else to catch me, gives me what my dad used to call "the willies". Very likely, what bothers me is the idea that I'm going to be flying through the air with no control whatsoever, completely dependent on someone else to catch me, to decide my fate. That would be terrifying. And underlying that terror is the fact that we human beings do not like change.

Change generally feels to human beings like we are flying uncontrolled from one place to another. We prefer safety, which is why one of the major pieces of advice that seminarians always get is, "Don't move anything. Don't change the altar candles." People don't like change. Well, if you don't want to change, now might not be your favorite time. Our

accustomed way of living has been diminished. We can't go to our favorite places. We can't dine in our preferred restaurants. Many of us can't go to work. We can't go to church. Things have changed. Our world has shrunk. And many of us are struggling to adapt, feeling that we can't control our world events nor even our own lives. And all of us probably hope someone will stretch out their arms very soon and catch us, and our lives will be back and safe once more.

The thing is that Christian faith shows us that God has never been very patient with our desire not to change. Christian faith doesn't come without huge changes, negative or positive. Our scriptures today include two giant changes in the church. One bad thing happens, the beloved deacon Stephen gets stoned to death. And one incredibly good thing happens, Jesus is raised from the dead, inexplicably. Well, these are important events, changes, but the reason they're important, the reason that they're in our Bible and that we're reading about them 2000 years later is that those changes lead to transformation. Now, what's the difference between change and transformation? Well, change is imposed from the outside. All of us undergo change. We get older, our health changes, our jobs change, our relationships change, our children grow up and move away, a pandemic happens. Changes come from the outside, and we have to adjust.

But transformation comes from inside. Transformation is a shift of fundamental beliefs and priorities. Transformation that happens on the inside produces lasting changes, lasting differences in behavior. The writer Flora Slausen Welder says, "Transformation involves much more than mere adaptation to our manipulation. Transformation implies new meaning, new creation rather than change." Change happens to all of us, but transformation is our choice. Transformation happens because at the deep, interior cellular level people shift their beliefs, they rethink their behaviors. And at our best transformed people can inspire a whole communities, whole churches, whole nations to new ways of being.

So we have these two huge stories of change today, one death, when resurrection, but listen to how it's not the change itself that transforms things, it's how people respond to the change that makes the difference. In a reading from Acts chapter seven, the Deacon Stephen gets in trouble and he gets stoned to death. And he dies like Jesus, forgiving his killers, God receiving the spirit. But that's not the only transformation that happens in this story. The church is transformed too, because in the very next chapter, Acts chapter eight, we see enormous suffering happening as the temple authorities begin persecuting the disciples in Jerusalem. And the church up until now was headquartered in the temple in Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel with great success, baptizing thousands of people, and they probably assumed it would go on like that forever.

But suddenly they are thrown out of the temple that they thought would always be their familiar, comfortable home. Possibly they thought that the era of the church was over. So, it may sound familiar. What do you do when everything is lost? Well, here's what they did. The Holy Spirit flings them out into the countryside where the apostles proclaim the good news of Christ in Samaria and to an Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza and to people that they thought probably weren't even qualified to be Christians. And yet those people hear and receive the good news of Jesus with joy. And from there the Gospel goes out to all the nations. The stoning of Stephen, the persecution of Christians, was a change. How the apostles responded was transformation. They completely rethought their mission and their calling.

Even more striking is the transformation that follows the change in our apostles. So the disciples, as John chapters 21 opens, they've heard the good news of the empty tomb. They have seen the risen Jesus in person. They have touched the wounds in his hands. They know the great change that has happened. Death has been defeated. Christ has been raised from the dead. But it hasn't transformed them yet. What did they do? They head home to Galilee and go fishing, exactly what

they did before Jesus ever came along. Human beings are so incredibly resistant to change that we don't know how to handle it. We return to the old habits the first chance we get. So Jesus appears to them one more time. He points out that what they are doing is futile. "Fish on the other side of the boat," he says, "change your habits, transform yourselves."

And they try it and they have so many fish that the boat can't hold them. Scarcity is transformed into abundance and in the light of this new abundance, they suddenly recognize who is standing among them. They shout, "It is the Lord!" they go and they greet him with joy and he feeds them in this barbeque on the beach. He feeds them right before he asks them to turn around and go feed others, in the Gospel that you'll hear next week, a mission that will resolve in the good news of the resurrection and a new life in Christ being preached to the ends of the earth. It seems that the resurrection was only a change, a big change, that defeated death forever, but only a change. They had to respond to the change. They had to rethink their behaviors. They had to rethink their mission. They had to be transformed.

And because they were transformed, because they agreed to fish on the other side of the boat, because they learned to do different things than they had ever done before, because they accepted the gift that Jesus had to offer. And then they realized that they had to do more than accept, they had to give that gift to others. Because of that transformation, we are Christians today. We know the good news of Christ. We know that death no longer has dominion over us. We know that God's love wins. God's love always wins. And we too can be transformed. Hallelujah.

But, for us, just as for those original disciples, transformation doesn't come without a cost. Transformation doesn't just happen on the inside. Transformation has to be manifested in how we change our behaviors on the outside, changed in the things that we are passionate about, changed even in our willingness to accept change.

Sometimes you have to learn to fish on the other side of the boat.

So how, in this pandemic, in this quarantine, in this isolation and these changes that we are experiencing now, how might God be calling us to be transformed? Well, it's my opinion that the church has been called to transformation for at least 20 years now, maybe 40. In person attendance at churches has declined, congregations have gotten older. There is a big, vast world of fish, that is people, in our communities who may not ever heard the good news of Christ or if they've heard it have no idea why it should make any difference to them, why it is life transforming good news. People's ways of communicating and gathering have changed. The world is different. And maybe we've grown too attached to our buildings, concentrated too hard on Sunday morning as the focus of our mission. As much as I love our buildings and our Sunday worship, I think God has been calling us not to settle down in our temples, not to content ourselves only with fishing in our familiar Galilees for quite a while now.

And while I don't believe that God brings terrible events like a pandemic in order to bring about transformation, I do believe, you might say, that God is an opportunist. Terrible things happen but God can find the opportunity in every negative event to transform God's church. So how is our church being called to transformation? I think that there is a danger in our beautiful Sunday in person celebrations that we can grow to love them so much that we can get the idea that Sunday morning worship is at the center of our mission. When what worship is, is how Christ feeds us our very own barbecue on the beach and then sends us out to do our mission to feed others. The mission of the followers of Jesus Christ has always focused on discipleship, evangelism, and service. Discipleship is how we learn to follow Jesus more closely.

So this time of quiet and isolation can actually become a time to deepen your prayer life, to study

the Bible, to join with your community of faith in exploring Christian truths, to get to know Jesus better, to come to love him even more deeply. What a great time this is to do those things. Evangelism is how we share the good news of Christ with others. So who do you know who in a time of pandemic, loneliness, fear, and death needs to hear a message of life and love and joy and peace and hope. Well, share that message with them, that God brings love into places of fear and life into places of death. Service is how we care for the other people that God loves, that is all of them. So who do you know who needs a helping hand, a call or care, a trip to the grocery store, some food or an act of kindness to relieve economic suffering, a new ministry, a way of feeding the hungry, of caring for those who have lost their jobs?

This is the time to offer that care to transform our mission of feeding the world. The pandemic, the shelter in place order, the fact that we can't worship in our own church, that's the change. How we adapt to the change, that's the transformation. And I believe that as we allow our hearts to be transformed, we can learn how to let go of the way that we have always done things and experience Christian life anew. Because we know that when we stretch out our arms, no matter how much the world has changed around us, the resurrection of Jesus Christ tells us that the God of love will be right there to catch us and to lead us to abundant life. Hallelujah.