

“I’ve Changed”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Acts 9: 1-9, 19b-22 and Matthew 17: 1-9

“The idea of *coming out* is one of the many gifts the LGBTQ community has brought to the world,” states Brian McLaren in his book *Should I Stay Christian*.

He continues, “Up until now, a person announces, you have thought of me in one way. But I have come to understand myself as something different, and I want to let you know.” While not wanting to minimize what coming out means to an LGBTQ person, I think that the analogy is good for us all. For the truth is, we change. We don’t think the same things we did a few years ago, or even a few days ago. Or maybe we’ve kept quiet about something, and we can’t keep quiet anymore. Whatever the context, many of us need an authentic, honest, thoughtful naming of the changes in who we are and what we believe.

For others, the shooting at Michigan State this past week had much more profound effects on us than previous shootings. Maybe we went there. Maybe we know someone who does. Maybe it’s because we are connected to this place, Michigan State University, differently than other places. There may even be some

guilt that we had not been as affected by previous mass shootings as this one. Everyone's experience is different. The point is that sometimes in life things happen to us, or around us, that change who we are and what we think about things. And as much as people say to us that they are excited and welcome change in us, that isn't always the case.

It seems to me that a lot of people are invested in others being and acting in a specific way. In short, to act the way they always have. If you have been a more silent type of person, then people want you to remain that way. They would never say it, but it's true. When you change, people can't take it, don't know what to do, get uncomfortable, and sometimes even pull away from you. LGBTQ persons know this best. They were able to fit in with their families, their friends, and even their faith community for the longest time. People assumed that they were straight. People assumed that one day they would marry and have children...isn't that what everyone does? Well, no. Not everyone does. Whether gay, straight, or fluid, people live lives differently. Things happen to them and within them that change them profoundly. And at some point, for many people, they hold a truth that they must share. There is nothing more honorable, in my opinion, than someone having trust in you to tell you a truth that they have

struggled with throughout their lives. To be trusted. To be seen as “safe”. For many, this is an unsafe world. It is a world where we are expected to fit in, be “normal” (whatever that is), and just get along.

I know in my own case that as I delved further into my spirituality, many things changed for me and about me. I’m not the same person I was in 2017 when I entered the Men’s Rites of Passage in Minnesota that summer. While that event alone didn’t make all the changes in me, it was part of it. The 2013 sabbatical summer, the UCC CREDO experience for clergy, and a host of other things changed with me. I was no longer able to accept shallow, sound-byte theology, for example. That rules out a lot of popular praise music. The killing of George Floyd and others made me begin to question even more so the issue of race, economics and how they relate to how our nation functions. Mass shootings, especially at MSU this week, made me speak in ways I haven’t about gun violence and even mental health. I could go on for a while about things, but I think you get the point. One reason I’m in Gaylord is many in my previous life couldn’t accept the changes in me. That’s not the whole story, of course, but I think you’ll agree that there will come a time when we cannot stay the way we’ve been, and changes need to be made.

Our study over the past several weeks of the church, McLaren's book and Lillian Daniels' *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To* have changed me as well. While I still have issues with my denomination and the wider church, this study has given me the language to begin to talk about how I've changed about church, faith, inclusion, politics and religion. The major change...being willing to talk about it.

Many experiences had a role in my making this change. One was a participant in this congregation who encouraged me to name my truths. That's not the language they used, but they encouraged me in the pulpit to be more up front about what I believe to be true and why. I took them up on that and have been overjoyed that many in my life have appreciated the change.

This sermon has been more about me than I would like it to. However, I think we need to see people make changes in their lives, take risks, and do what is theirs to do so that we have experiences to behold that prove that even when someone changes, they are not left alone. Sure, friends may change. Job changes or moves may change. Relationships may change. It's no picnic making major life changes, but in the end, we see people become their true selves and we begin to think, "maybe I can do that, too."

As we enter into Lent in the coming weeks, our theme will be based in the familiar scripture from Hebrews 11:1. The full scripture is, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We're not using the whole verse, but it's implied. No, for Lent, we are going into a place not seen. Faith tells us that there is something we can be sure of that is in a place not often seen. That is where God is. We can't see God sometimes not because God is hiding, but because our vision is clouded. We don't know everything that is ahead of us. It's like walking a tightrope into a fog, trusting that even if and when we fall, we fall into the embrace of a divine being we can trust. Every time I look at someone who has made major life changes, I see that they seem to have in common a core of their being that is convinced that they are going to be okay. For Christians, that embrace in the midst of a fall comes to us from God in Jesus Christ. But this is true for those who are in a variety of other faith traditions as well.

It seems that in order for humans to make substantive, lasting, deep change, they must have some kind of notion that there is something deeper and greater than themselves. I hope that together we can journey to that place where the fog is thickest, and see that even when we cannot see, there is something...someone (?)...there to carry us forward. Perhaps the greatest

example of what I'm talking about is Jesus himself. He could have lived a lot longer than 33 years had he simply stayed quiet, not changed from his cute childhood days, and gone along to get along. And yet, there are few who have changed the world as dramatically as he did.

Easy it is not. Scary it is. But faith requires us to be our deepest, most honest, most authentic, most real (whatever words you want to pick) human selves. I hope you'll continue to change, not because you're so bad, but because each day you learn something more in this world, you are affected by something differently than in the past, or for whatever reason, you have chosen change. May you one day, if not now, be free to be who you are and not what someone expects you to be. For you are a gift from God. One of a kind. Called to do that which no one else is as well-suited as you are. Not every issue or cause will be yours, but if you do what is yours to do, and I do what is mine to do, and others do what is theirs to do. Ah, then, the world will become that world that God first dreamed of when God said, "Let there be light".

I have changed. I'm so glad. I'm even more blessed to not be done changing. Best change...I'm better able to name what is happening with me, what matters, and why. There's still a long journey ahead. But no matter where we are

in our journey, there is someone who always and forever says, “you are welcome here. There is a place for you.” I pray that the place for you is in this church, or another, but wherever it may be, may you know that there is a place for you as you.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.