

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Lent 2 (C) ~ 16 March 2025
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church
Philippians 3:17—4:1
Psalm 27:1-8, 14-18
Luke 13:31-35

Jesus Changes Everything¹

One of the greatest joys of my ministry is the opportunity to mentor seminarians preparing for ordination in the Episcopal Church. It is such a privilege and gift to walk with Melissa — just as it was with Caitlin, Katie, Fergie, and Robin before her — as she is formed, more and more, into the priest whom Jesus has called and envisions her to be. It's really a journey of mutual companionship, of learning from one another: I have gained at least as much from each of these remarkable women as I have given. (By the way: It needs to be said that there really *are* male seminarians in the Church, too...It's just that women often seek out other women as role models.)

Recently I was talking with a seminarian (yet another remarkable young woman) interested in serving here at St. Dunstan's next year, after Melissa graduates, and she asked a question that took me completely off guard: She wanted to know the most essential task of a parish priest. There are so many facets to ministry in a congregation that she wondered what I regarded to be of greatest importance. I don't think that anyone had ever asked me that before, and before I really had a chance to think about it, I blurted out,

My job is to help people fall in love with Jesus.

Do you know how sometimes you aren't really sure what you think about something until you hear yourself say it out loud?

¹From Stanley Hauerwas, *Jesus Changes Everything: A New World Made Possible* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2025)

It was like that. I have no idea where that answer came from; I had never thought of my priesthood that way.

But the more I pondered it, the more I realized that that is exactly what I believe: The job of the priest – and, I would argue, the job of every Christian – is to help others fall in love with Jesus.

Did you catch that? That’s your job, too. Think of it as one beggar telling another where to find bread.²

Sharing Good News.

Now, another word for “sharing Good News,” of course, is “evangelism,” which may make some of us squirm, because of its negative connotation. But all it really means is helping people fall in love with Jesus.

The great American theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:

*The gospel is...a call of adherence to this man, God's very son, who has bound our destiny to his, who has made the story of our life his story.*³

And, as one of Hauerwas’ students elaborates,

*to preach the gospel essentially is to tell this story [i.e., the story of Jesus] and then trust that Jesus Christ is fascinating enough, captivating enough that as his story begins to seep deeply into our stories, we are transformed.*⁴

Our job, then, is to **tell** and to **trust**: To tell the story of His birth, life, death, and resurrection and then to trust God to do the rest. Our job is not to persuade or compel or browbeat (verbs often associated with “evangelism” in many of our minds).

² Attributed to pastor and theologian D.T. Niles (1908-1970)

³ From The PloughCast: Jesus Changes Everything: An Afternoon with Stanley Hauerwas, Mar 7, 2025
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-ploughcast/id1555276343?i=1000698269600>

⁴ *Ibid.*

Our job is to get out of the way and just let Jesus be Jesus – let Him do the work He has come to do.

And what is that work?

Transformation.

Transformation through compassion, forgiveness, and mercy. Yes, and love. Not sappy, happy-clappy love that doesn't demand anything of anybody, but rather the kind of love that calls us to grow: The love of a parent for a child, at once wanting to protect *and* challenge, to comfort *and* motivate.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is always inviting people into relationship with Him, through preaching, teaching, and healing, and also simply by being with them – by walking and talking with them, by breaking bread with them.

Jesus teaches and lives as though every human being is created in the image of God and precious in God's sight, worthy of respect and dignity.

Jesus – God incarnate, Immanuel, *God with us*, binding our destiny to His, making the story of our life His story.

And... It's very clear that Jesus enters into human existence not to endorse it, to give His followers a gold star and a pat on the back, but rather to change it by His very presence.

It's like that moment in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy wakes up in Munchkinland and the film suddenly has gone from black-and-white to technicolor.

This is what Jesus does in the world He comes to inhabit.

Jesus changes everything.

In his Letter to the Philippians, St. Paul writes that Jesus

will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.

Jesus does this by drawing people into community with one another and with Himself, and they are all made different by it. He shows them Who God really is – and, more than that, He shares His very “God-ness” with them, that they might be changed, more and more, into the people they were created by God to be. The community becomes the locus of that transformation, where people who have been changed by their relationship with Jesus in turn help to change others – not by persuading or compelling or browbeating, but simply by getting out of the way and allowing Jesus to be Jesus.

St. Paul suggests that there is something so irresistible about Jesus, *qua* Jesus – not Jesus co-opted or politicized, but Jesus as the pure Presence of God in our world – that makes it difficult not to fall in love with Him.

In Luke’s Gospel this morning, Jesus likens Himself to a mother hen, brooding over her chicks, protecting them from danger, including the “fox,” King Herod. I have to say that this is one of my favorite ways of thinking about Jesus – and not just because of the female, maternal imagery.

There is a story in Jewish folklore in which a mother hen clucks loudly to her chicks in the midst of a barn fire, so that they will come to her and take refuge under her wings as the flames rage around them. Once the fire is out, the farmer finds the mother hen’s dead body and lifts it up to discover the chicks still alive beneath her. The mother has given her very life to protect and save her offspring.⁵

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2001), 171.

This, of course, is precisely what Jesus does: He sacrifices Himself, giving Himself over to the earthly powers that seek to destroy, to demonstrate for us the ultimate redemption of God.

How can we not fall in love with a God like that?

How can we ignore Jesus' command to go and do likewise?

And this is where our work as Christians, our work as the Church, comes in. Our job as followers of Jesus, called into community with one another and with Him, is to be a locus of transformation, what one scholar has called

*an alternative social order...A life together that is far better than what the world can offer.*⁶

Stanley Hauerwas, the theologian I mentioned before, is probably best known for coining the term “resident aliens” to describe Christians, riffing on St. Paul’s assertion that true our “citizenship is in heaven.” We properly belong to another “country,” the argument goes, another “homeland” (that is, the Kingdom of God), and we are just sojourning here.

According to Hauerwas,

*the role of Christians is not to transform government but to live lives that model the love of Christ. Rather than try to convince others to change their ethics, Christians should model a new set of ethics that are grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.*⁷

In other words, instead of beating ourselves against a wall trying to change the seemingly implacable “powers that be,” our job is to love Jesus fiercely – telling His story to one another (using words, if necessary, as St. Francis would say), and trusting God to do the rest.

⁶From The PloughCast: Jesus Changes Everything: An Afternoon with Stanley Hauerwas, Mar 7, 2025 <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-ploughcast/id1555276343?i=1000698269600>

⁷<https://www.amazon.com/Resident-Aliens-Christian-Expanded-Anniversary/dp/1426781903>

What would it be like if we in this parish community were to strive to be “an alternative social order... far better than what the world can offer”? What if we were to listen to and hear the Gospel story, and allow it to transform us? What if we were to speak and act and think and pray as though we were madly in love with Jesus? What if we were to get out of the way and just let Jesus be Jesus? What difference would that make – to ourselves, to one another, and to our world?

Jesus does, indeed, change everything.

Amen.