

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 18 (A) ~ 6 September 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Romans 13:8-14
Psalm 149
Matthew 18:15-20

I owe it to you all to begin today with a warning, in the interest of transparency:

Being a member of the Church **will** change you.

Notice I didn't say "might," or "could possibly." I said **will**.

We don't often hear such definitive statements, do we? Think about all those pharmaceutical ads on TV, when the announcer suddenly speeds up, reading the whole long list of potential horrible side effects of taking this drug.

You might grow an eleventh toe. Or, "in the extremely unlikely event," death may occur.

These are all the things that *could* happen – although, God willing, they probably won't.

But Big Pharma has to warn us, "just in case."

Contrast all those disclaimers with my experience at the ophthalmologist's office this past week. I went to see him because for I have this annoying floater bouncing around my right eye. It looks like a spider, so I've named it "Charlotte." Well, I had decided that, after more than a year together, it was time for Charlotte and me to part company. So I asked Dr. Byrnes if we could schedule surgery to remove it. And he answered that yes, of course, he would be happy to operate – as long as I realize that, within a year or two, I *will* develop a cataract in that eye.

Not might.

Not could possibly.

But *will*. One hundred percent guaranteed.

So suddenly Charlotte doesn't seem so bad anymore.

Being a member of the Church is like that, too: It *will* change you.

Not might.

Not could possibly.

But *will*. One hundred percent guaranteed.

Here's what I mean:

Unlike other endeavors in life that are, ultimately, solitary pursuits, being a Christian is – by definition – communal.

Think about it: In school, even though we are grouped with other people, at the end of the day we are evaluated according to our own performance.

The same is true in our professional lives: We strive to succeed, to get ahead; we compete with colleagues to get the promotion, to acquire our “dream job.”

These are mostly individual aspirations (with some exceptions, of course).

But Church is inherently *communal*. That is the whole point.

Remember that Jesus didn't minister alone, or with just one other person at a time. He called folks into community with Him. No doubt at times it would have been easier to get things done without the disciples slowing Him down. Nevertheless, Jesus chose to form a community to walk with Him, eat with Him, serve with Him, and yes, even frustrate Him at times.

Jesus calls *us* into community with Him, too. And yes, it likely would be far more efficient and effective for Him to “go it alone.” Nevertheless, He gathers us together as His Body, to minister as His hands and feet in the world.

The Church is Jesus' force multiplier: We have the ability to accomplish together that which none of us can do alone.

But it's more than that: Jesus calls us into relationship with Him and one another, Jesus forms and molds us into the Body of Christ here on earth, not only to change the world, but also to change *us*.

Because to be part of the Church is, ultimately, to be *transformed*. To grow closer and closer and closer into the image of God. To become more and more the people God created and intends us to be.

And that work of transformation doesn't happen in isolation. It happens by entering into something that is far bigger than we are ourselves. It happens by committing to be in relationship and walk with and care for other people – some of whom may be quite different from us.

So much of our lives are spent with other people with whom we have things in common: We start out with others our own age, our own grade, in school, and later on we find ourselves working alongside others in a similar profession. But when it's working right Church is one of the few places where we find ourselves cheek-by-jowl with a variety of folks running the gamut in age, life experience, political affiliation, etc. The Church – which takes its name from the Greek ἐκκλησία, “people called out” – beckons us out of our individual lives, out of isolation, out of our separateness, to be community together.

In Christian community we bump up against other people living full and complex lives riddled with real-world issues, just like us. Despite appearances sometimes, the Church is not just a superficial, Stepford-like gathering of plastic people without a care in the world. Far from it – and beware of anyone who tries to convince you that Christianity is for the perfect, or for the fully-“cooked.”

The Dutch priest and theologian Henri Nouwen put it this way:

In this world, so many people live with the burden of self-rejection...Underneath a successful and highly praised career can live a fearful person who doesn't think much of himself or herself. In community comes that **mutual vulnerability** in which we forgive each other and celebrate each other's gifts.¹

¹ Henri Nouwen, “Moving from Solitude to Community,” *Leadership Magazine*, Volume 16, Issue 2 Spring, 1995.

That's the secret sauce of the Church, right there: *mutual vulnerability*. The recognition not only that we don't *have* to "have it all together," but that we *can't*.

Each of us is as imperfect and broken and blessed as the other.

So we strive to support and forgive and celebrate each other – and that's where the magic of transformation happens.

We grow as we learn to carry others' fears and hurts and dreams, *and* as we allow them to carry ours. We grow by sharing our insecurities and failures as well as our successes.

Because guess what? When we can recognize and acknowledge our own weaknesses and shortcomings, we become more patient with and understanding of the weaknesses and shortcomings of the people next to us in the pew or in front of us in the Communion line.

And then...

Then we begin to be more patient with and understanding of our classmates and colleagues, and – dare I say it? – the members of our own family.

Church, Christian community, is a laboratory in which we experiment with forgiveness and being forgiving. Here we learn to hold others' sins and transgressions a little more lightly because we practice accepting our own.

We are a collection of hurting and broken folk seeking to be healed, longing to be made whole. And not just for ourselves. Ideally, we will be transformed and healed *so that* we can go out and minister to *other* hurting and broken folk who need so desperately to hear The Good News of Jesus Christ. And so on, and so on, and so on.

But lest I idealize the Church too much, it's important to acknowledge that life in community is *difficult*. It is *work*. It takes *effort*.

As Henri Nouwen also said,

community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.²

² Nouwen, "Moving from Solitude to Community."

That about sums it up, doesn't it?

Jesus knows this (probably better than most, given the cast of characters with whom He hung out) – which is precisely why we get the teaching in this morning's Gospel.

Any time people come together in real community there is bound to be conflict. There is bound to be tension. There is bound to be disagreement. The question is...What do we do about it?

Many of us want to avoid conflict at all cost. We have a natural tendency to "keep the peace." That seems like the right, like the noble, thing to do. Sally many have offended me deeply, but I am polite, I say nothing. I just grin (even if with gritted teeth) and bear it. It's safer that way.

Maybe...but it isn't authentic. Jesus is clear: "If another member of the Church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Deal with it directly! Be real with one another! Tell the truth – for God's sake, and for yours!

Jesus models spiritually-mature, adult behavior. He calls His beloved to be reconcilers, to be healers, to be truth-tellers. And that means embodying a persistence in human relationships that is probably foreign to many of us. Jesus sets out a step-by-step process for dealing with conflict, gradually pulling in more witnesses to help restore relationship. If the offender *still* will not be reconciled, then "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

But wait: How, exactly, *does* Jesus deal with Gentiles and tax collectors? He loves them. He honors and respects them enough to go after them – not to punish or humiliate them, but to bring them back into the fold. Jesus constantly invites them into community, into the Church, into His embrace. He is always about restoring relationship, not walking away from it. And He invites us to do the same.

But we will be *changed*, in the process. We will be transformed.

Consider yourselves warned. *Amen.*