

Opening

O God,
Maybe it's because you have eternity that you seem so willing to wait while we wander.
We get distracted--by the allure of easy answers, all those promises of painless change.
You have always given us freedom, us the power to choose.
But maybe you could be less patient with us, because there are moments...
when our awareness sharpens and we must speak the truth:
that our time is too short to waste any more.
Break our willingness to dabble in faith,
to settle for peace that is flimsy,
to dodge the claims that your kingdom makes on us.
Disrupt all the ways that we fritter ourselves, our time, our relationships, our attention.
Do it harshly, if that's what is needed,
so that our deep longings—for life and love and peace and well-being,
not just for ourselves but for all people, do not go forever unsatisfied.

In the silence of this moment, let us see and speak honestly with you about the truth of our lives.

On this day speak again the word our lives have already been speaking to us.
On this day let us listen.
Come now and be the clarity that compels us to turn and face you,
And to find there what we have been looking for all along.
Amen

***Power Rising: Make Us a People Ready
Ready to Make Promises***
Mark 9:2-9

The Christian tradition tells this slightly strange story every year around this time, always the Sunday before Lent begins. Jesus goes up a mountain and suddenly his clothes turn into angel attire, and he is flanked by the two biggest heroes in his country's history: Moses and Elijah. Both of those ghosts were heroes long dead. Both symbolized—to the disciples who were with Jesus that day and the people who would have heard this story first—the very best of their tradition, the most God-like people who had ever lived. It's as if a candidate for President were seen tipping her head in private consultation with George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

We call this the *Transfiguration* story. Jesus is *transfigured*—his shape is changed—so that he can be seen for who he really is: not just a regular guy, but—in case you had missed it before—

something special. Someone who deserved to be in the company of these great ones. Maybe even the presence of God himself.

This is one of the defining stories in the Gospels about who Jesus was; a rare, clear moment when the people around him could stop squinting their eyes and tipping their heads to try to catch a different perspective, a better view of this person they never quite understood. This time, just this time, God himself spoke. “This is my son. Listen to him.”

That must have been startling. Inspiring, but also frightening. I imagine the disciples’ heads were spinning, trying to figure out what they had just seen, what to do about it. ‘I know,’ Peter said. ‘We’ll build a monument, a shrine. We’ll capture this moment when all our history has come together, and we’ll preserve it.’ Because that’s what a tradition does—right? It preserves things. Isn’t that what religion does, hold on to the past, hold *us* in a story that has already happened?

But Jesus wanted none of that. No shrines. No monument. ‘Let’s go,’ he said to his friends. ‘We have work to do.’ And Jesus turned around and went back down the mountain, to do the most important work of his life. Mark places this story exactly halfway through his Gospel. It’s a hinge moment, when even the healing and teaching Jesus had been doing all along seem take on a different character. He does the same things, but with a different authority. He knows his time is short. And he’s looking forward, not back.

Jesus’ work was never about preserving things. Where he came from, the stories that made up his tradition—they were important to him. I think he was probably a little awe-struck to see Moses and Elijah too. He knew how important they were. But establishing his own greatness, his place among those saints, was never the point of Jesus’ work, or of what he said. Jesus was here to change the world. He had a purpose, a mission: to unleash on earth the power of compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace. To mobilize the people who followed him so that they would keep changing the world for good, even after he was gone.

That’s what the church is, when it’s actually *being the church*. It’s not about worshipping at some monument to the past, or building a new one. It’s also not about finding a nice group of people to spend Sunday mornings with. It’s about coming together to tell and hear the stories of the Christian tradition until they sink so deeply into us that we too are compelled—like Jesus was—to get off the mountain and turn toward the work of loving people in practical ways—healing them, hearing them, making the world a safe space for them to live. To be a Christian—a follower of Jesus—is to be, just like he was, a *compassion-driven changemaker*.

This is what I love most about the United Methodist brand of Christianity: its knowing that faith that matters—the only faith that matters—is the kind that focuses your eyes sideways, not just up and down. That your religion is never just something private between you and God, nor is it mostly about saving your soul for the life to come. It’s about how you live now. And it’s about the way ‘how you live now’ changes something for the people around you too. The mission of the United Methodist Church—the whole reason for our being—is *to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*.

And that's great, isn't it? I know you know this. In these seven months I have been with you, I've seen that you are drawn to this hope of making an impact on the world as much as I am. I've watched you pour yourselves out for things that matter: Compassion Week, Hope's Corner, mission trips to repair storm-damaged homes and build new ones, partnerships that support other organizations that meet people's every-day, real needs.

And I would bet that you have asked yourself the same question I ask from time to time: Is all of this good activity we do actually changing the world? Is the church having the kind of impact that we hope for it?

There is buried in the church's mission statement an assumption: that our discipleship, our personal transformation that happens as we immerse ourselves more deeply in life with God, will lead to social transformation, a positive and lasting impact on the world. I think it's the right theory; it should work that way. But the truth is, the Church—not just this church, but the whole Christian Church—is not very good at knowing how to make social change happen. We feed homeless people; we educate ourselves about issues of injustice...but is that work actually changing anything? Others non-profit organizations, Scouts, political action groups, even tech companies, sometimes seem more effective at making change than the Church is.

Let me tell you about some work that I know is changing the world. Ashoka is the world's largest social entrepreneurship organization. Since 1980, Ashoka has been sending Ashoka fellows—'innovators for the common good'—out into the world to create change for good. You already know some of the work of Ashoka fellows: Zipcar, the company that figured out a way to offer people without cars a low-cost way to have one for just a few hours at a time, was an Ashoka Fellow's project. Wikipedia, the online platform for the free sharing of knowledge, was started by an Ashoka fellow. Playworks, an organization that sends young adults out onto elementary school playgrounds at recess to organize children to practice empathy and character while they play, was an Ashoka project. In the forty years of its life, Ashoka has sent changemakers all over the world, to partner with others and put in place their ideas for solving some problem or making life better for everyone.

David Brooks' column in the *New York Times* last Thursday was about his interview with Bill Drayton, the founder of Ashoka. He told his readers what Ashoka knows: "Social transformation flows from personal transformation. You change the world when you hold up a new and more attractive way to live...If we could give everyone the chance to experience an agency moment, to express love and respect in action, the ramifications really would change the world."

This is what followers of Jesus have always believed.

Ashoka has always believed that the most important characteristic of a changemaker is empathy, the ability to see things through someone else's eyes. *Compassion* is the Church's word for that quality. It means looking at the world around you, the people around you, with eyes filled with love, wanting the best for them as much as you want it for yourself, being willing to give yourself away for the sake of making someone else's life better. Jesus was a *compassion-driven changemaker*.

What if what the Church knows best—the stories that connect us with Jesus, God’s inexhaustible well of compassion, were paired with what Ashoka knows about *how* to make change in the world?

What if you already know you are a changemaker in other parts of your life—your work, or your leadership at school, or that idea for helping someone that you organized other people to join you in? What if your faith helped do that—*be* that—even more, and even more effectively?

What if you are someone who has always wanted your life to have an impact, to be part of changing the world for good, and you just haven’t known how to do it?

What if you discovered that you are not too old or too young or too tired or busy or already-responsible-for-lots-of-things to make change happen in the part of the world that is right there in front of you?

We—Los Altos United Methodist Church—have been offered a quite extraordinary opportunity. Through a series of connections so unlikely that it seems like God must have been involved somehow, we have been invited to partner with Ashoka in a project that will make LAUMC the first in what might grow to be a network of ‘changemaker churches’ all over the world. Your courageous Church Council decided unanimously in January to enter into a collaboration agreement that will bring Ashoka leaders here this spring to begin a Fellows program here, with a group of people from our church. Everyone will have a chance to participate. Not all of us will be fellows, But our hope—our plan—is that the fellows’ work will lead the rest of us into becoming a church of *compassion-driven changemakers*, not only in what we do together, here, but everywhere you go, every other day of the week.

This project, this *Changemaker Initiative*, as we’ve begun calling it, won’t change everything we do. We will still worship, and sing, teach and practice the traditions of our faith, share stories and meals as we always have. The church’s mission will be the same as it has always been: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. But I expect that becoming a ‘changemaker church’ will help us live out that mission more effectively. I think this is what faithfulness might look like for we who live and work in Silicon Valley in 2018.

And one more thing, Los Altos United Methodist Church: This partnership we are starting on is the kind of big, bold, forward-looking experiment that only a church like this one could even begin to think about taking on. Listen to this part of an email that an Ashoka executive sent me last month:

“As you know, you are leading in the faith community world by embarking on the Changemaker Journey as an entire faith community. You will forever have the honor of having been first, and we are deeply grateful for your courage and pioneering spirit.”

No monuments, Jesus said to Peter. Your faith is not about building a shrine to the past. It’s about moving out, carrying that strong foundation with you. It’s about heading down the mountain, into the world that needs something from us. Come on. We’ve got work to do.