St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Welcoming Worshiping Working

13th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 16, Year A
A Sermon Preached by Fr Ian M Delinger
on August 23, 2026
Exodus 1:8-2:10 / Psalm 124 / Romans 12:1-8 / Matthew 16:13-20

We will give thanks to You, O Lord, with our whole heart;
before the gods we will sing Your praise.

So, I saw this on the Episcopal News Service Facebook page:

> *St Paul's Church in the City of Albany, NY seeks a Rector who can walk on water, make everybody happy all the time, zap water into wine to save on sacristy expenses, and fill the church completely every Sunday.*
>
> *Now that we have your attention, click here for further information.*

After a split second of self-evaluation, I did *not* click for further information! I'd kinda like to see the cast of characters who did!

Sometimes in seminary – and after ordination, as well – when someone who did not fulfill the qualities sought by St Paul's in Albany was deemed to be unpleasant for whatever reason, someone would inevitably say, "*Thank goodness he'll never by my vicar!*" ["Vicar" being a synonym for "priest" in England, even though it's a job title, not a vocation.] Since we were all headed toward ordination or already ordained, it was certain that we would not be a member of the congregation of the flawed person. And occasionally, but more risky, someone would say, "*Well, at least he'll never be my bishop!*" That's less of a guarantee, but also a much smaller pool of people.

Let me give you an example: In a bit of a fit, a classmate told me why she was so hostile toward me: "*I hate America; I hate everything America stands for; and I hate Americans*." Well, that cleared *that* up! At least she'll never be my vicar!

Sharing that with you is not to shame that person. It's to hold her up as a shining example of God using flawed people in His mission to spread the love of God through Jesus Christ. We have a tendency to believe that ordained persons are somehow better than the average person in the conduct of their lives, somehow immune to the humanness of being human. Sorry to disappoint you, but we aren't immune to the humanness of being human! And that includes me: believe me when I tell you that I have flaws, most of which are on full display.
And that brings me to today's readings. Paul – who we will hear in a couple of weeks presided over the stoning of our very own Patron Saint, Stephen – is calling us – not just clergy since they didn't exist yet – Paul is calling all of us to an impossible standard. And Jesus just gave the keys to the Kingdom to the disciple voted most likely to not understand what they're for!

My point is that God calls whomever God calls. I was told just before my ordination: *God calls the person you are now, not the person God wants you to be in the future*. God calls each one of us into the Body of Christ and into lay or ordained ministry as the person we are. But like Paul and Peter, we have to have faith, we have to be open to being transformed, and we have to allow our faith in Jesus to transform us. Otherwise:

> *[we come] to this Table for solace only, and not for strength;*
> *for pardon only, and not for renewal.*

Two Saturdays ago, I offered a homilette on the Feast of The Transfiguration of Christ. And what I see in today's readings is that Paul is asking for our Transfiguration into the Body of Christ, and Peter is transfigured – in both name and mission – into the model of faith on which the earthly Body of Christ will be built.

Transfiguration is what being a Christian – a follower of Jesus – is all about! And the main takeaway from the Transfiguration Story is "*How am I being transfigured*

– or transformed – into the likeness of Christ along my spiritual journey with Jesus?" Paul

> *appeals to you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*.

He appeals to you to lean into your gifts of the Spirit to do that, and with all humility.

For Peter, it's going to take a little while. He's still in the middle of messing up. It was only 2 weeks ago that we heard Peter's doubt about walking on water. In the chapter after today's Gospel, he's going to make the grave mistake of positioning himself higher than he should … in the story of The Transfiguration. And famously, Peter will deny that he even knows Jesus at Jesus' weakest moment as He is dragged off for trial and crucifixion. But, after Jesus is ascended, Peter seems to undergo full transfiguration into the leader that Jesus asserts today.
I often say that being a Christian is hard! And opening yourself up to being transfigured by the glory of Jesus is hard ... because it requires vulnerability. In your journey as a follower of Jesus, how have you been transformed?

Any transformation – either religious or secular – requires faith in the core principles. Our core principle is faith that Jesus offers each of us Eternal Life, and faith in that is deepened by both our prayer and worship and by whatever we do to the least of these, which, in turn, we do to Christ. Faith is what gets Peter the keys to the Kingdom. It's not what he does.

> *Who do you say that I am?*
> *You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!*

That faith transformed Peter along his spiritual journey, which got him the keys to the Kingdom. When you are asked

> *Who do you say Jesus is?*

at the beginning of your journey, you respond

> *The Messiah, the Son of the Living God. That's what the Bible says.*

As you go along your journey, your understanding of that, your experience of the Son of the Living God deepens…and you are being transformed! Your response becomes

> *The Messiah, the Son of the Living God. I know that and feel that to my core.*

But it's a journey of transformation.

Ernest Campbell, once the pastor of Riverside Church in New York, said at a conference:

> *The reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it.*[1]

I think that's very true. I think it's why people drift away from the church. People stop going to church when they realize that they weren't coming because of their faith in the first place, so they weren't being transformed by the exploration of faith that happens on Sunday mornings. What *keeps* you coming is the idea of a transformation of life, a life in Jesus Christ that makes you a part of the Body of Christ that Hades will not prevail against.

Being a follower of Jesus is risky yet exciting. We see that in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. It's risky – not because any of us will be martyrs for our faith – but because we have to be vulnerable in order to experience transformation, and our society ridicules vulnerability. It's exciting because that transformation makes all

[1] *Feasting on the Word*, Proper 16, Year A, Pastoral Perspective by Clifton Kirkpatrick, p776

things new! It offers a new perspective on life *and* on death! It's exciting because of the people you meet along the journey and the holy experiences that your vulnerability opens you up to.

That classmate of mine? We met up about 10 years later at a conference where we were in a room all day with only about 20 other people. She apologized to me for how she treated me all those years before. Her faith and her journey had transformed her. My faith and my journey had transformed me, too. We genuinely enjoyed one another's company for the duration of the conference. Our deepening knowledge and experience of the Son of the Living God is transforming us.

I've been ordained 22yrs, and I still can't walk on water, make everybody happy all the time, zap water into wine, or fill the church completely every Sunday – or *any* Sunday. But I have been transformed by my faith. I know and experience Jesus more deeply, and believe His call to me to be a follower to be both risky and exciting! And every time I renew my Baptismal Covenant – every time *we* renew it – we have to own our words:

I will, with God's help.

Opening up oneself to transformation such that they can repent; opening up oneself to transformation so they cannot be hurt; opening up oneself to transformation so that God can accomplish in them more than they can ask or imagine requires having a faith. Opening yourself up to transformation is doing something that requires faith. Knowing the Son of the Living God is not about how perfect and holy you are. It's not about the flaws you try to hide or excuse. It's about being transformed by your faith in the Messiah, Son of the Living God.

As Christians – followers of Jesus – God calls you as the person you are, with all the flaws that you have. If Peter with all his flaws can be given the keys to the Kingdom, God can use you, too. It requires faith in the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and the willingness to be transformed by that faith.

Will you ever be ready

> *to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God?*

You may never feel ready, or you may be over-confident about it. But if you really want to follow the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, know that you are being called as you are. And your *faith* will only be as valuable as your openness and vulnerability to be transformed.