

Sermon for the Feast of Peter, Paul, and Sallie  
July 1, 2018, PRLC  
Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 43; Ephesians 4:7, 11-16; John 10:11-18

This changes everything.

That was the theme of our Vacation Bible School this year: “This changes everything.”

And, not coincidentally, it is also the theme of the National Youth Gathering that is wrapping up right now in Houston. About 20 of our own youth from Phinney and other LYONS churches have been there, along with 31,000 of their closest friends. All week, with service work and Bible study and mass gatherings with worship and speakers, they’ve been exploring the theme, “This changes everything.”

It’s an easy theme to resonate. Because we all know that there are moments – moments in history and in our own lives – when something happens that changes the course of the future forever.

This week my 3 ½-month-old son started working on rolling over. This changes everything.

What have been the life-changing events in your life?

Now, when the organizers of the youth gathering chose their theme, I suspect they did not consider that it would be happening the week of June 29 – which happens to be the Feast of Peter and Paul. It was either a happy coincidence, or a wise choice. Because these two saints would be ideal mascots for such a theme.

Consider Peter – one of the 12 disciples. He first heard about Jesus from his brother Andrew, and he followed Jesus throughout his ministry. He heard Jesus teach; witnessed his miracles; ate with him. But when Jesus was facing his death, Peter denied even knowing him. Not once, but three times. This early disciple – one of the few who you’d expect to be more devoted than any of us – failed to proclaim that Jesus was his Lord in the most critical moment of his life. That was a pretty serious error in judgment, wouldn’t you say? Peter let his fear and his need for self-protection come before his love of Jesus. He probably thought he could never be forgiven for such a betrayal.

But later, Peter would find an empty tomb. And he would see Jesus with his own eyes when he appeared to the disciples. And then, the two would share a breakfast of grilled fish on a beach. During that meal together Jesus didn’t scold Peter for his three denials.

Instead he gave Peter three new opportunities to confess his faith. Three times, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me.” And every time, Peter answered, “yes.”

And it doesn't end there, because Jesus also gives Peter three commands – to feed his sheep. He places a new call on Peter's life, and Peter becomes the rock on which the Church is built.

Peter fails. But then he receives forgiveness. He is fed. He is loved. And he is called. And this changes everything.

A few years later, just as Peter was working to build the Christian community up, a man named Saul was doing everything in his power to destroy it, even with violence. But one day, Saul was struck blind and given a new vision...a vision that God's good news was for *all* people. The good news of Jesus. Saul became Paul, the apostle who went on to become one of the most cherished writers of our sacred texts.

He began spreading the inclusive message of Jesus' love. He worked tirelessly to end division within the Church – to open it up to outsiders, even Gentiles who some believed were not in God's family. He gave us lines like “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

You see, once the message of God's grace reached Saul's stubborn, violent heart, his eyes were opened to the truth that God is bigger and more loving than he ever imagined. This changed everything.

Against all odds, in spite of their unlikeliness -- God chose Peter and Paul to spread the message of Jesus. And a couple thousand years later, God is still calling unlikely people. God is still acting to forgive us, redeem us, open our eyes, and call us forward. God is still choosing apostles to build up the Church and feed the world with the good news of Jesus' love.

Sallie Shippen, a member of our congregation, was never expected to be a priest. Of course not. When Sallie was growing up girls couldn't even read lessons or acolyte in church. But one day she heard God call her to seminary. And this changed everything. Going to seminary would not be smooth sailing for Sallie...or for any woman of her time...but she persisted against many odds.

Because Sallie knew her call was from God, and she trusted God's voice. So she let God mess with her life. And through her journey, other people's eyes were opened along the way. The Church changed because of women like Sallie Shippen. She opened doors for people like me – and maybe people like you.

When Sallie was ordained 35 years ago at Trinity Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, the place was packed – it was standing room only. The few who would seek to protest her ordination were silenced by the multitude who were able to see, in her, God doing a new thing.

You might not know that Sallie possess a wide variety of spiritual gifts. And although she served faithfully and successfully as a deacon and a parish priest – a rock of the Church, like Peter – she also knows that disciples of Jesus have work to do outside of the Church, too, spreading good news, as Paul did, to those who need to hear a word of welcome and inclusion.

She is a gifted writer, an artist, a plant-whisperer, and a friend to dogs...especially those few special dogs who have ministered alongside her all these years. She continues to minister to this community as a participant in the WAY and as a faithful healing prayer minister.

I recently saw some of Sallie's current art projects. She's doing this incredible, one-of-a-kind thing – where she cuts tiny, delicate pieces of paper, and somehow forms them on a canvas to shape them into something striking. Collectively, these individual shreds of paper – seemingly plain and small – become together something powerful. Something remarkably beautiful.

It's a perfect image for the body of Christ. As we heard in the letter to the Ephesians this morning, "The gifts God gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God."

Each one of us, in our uniqueness, in our weakness, in our own way, is called to the mission of sharing God's love.

Two thousand years after Peter and Paul were called; and 35 years after Sallie Shippen was ordained; today – God is still at working calling people to this mission. Right now, 30,000 Lutheran youth are gathered in a stadium in Houston for closing worship. And a couple hundred people on Greenwood Avenue are gathered with them, too. All of us have been met by the good news of Jesus. Here, again today, *we* have been forgiven. We have been fed. We have been reminded of our value and our giftedness and our belovedness, and we have been called.

This changes everything.

This liberating love of Jesus that we know – it changes everything for us.

It changes how we vote. It changes how we speak. It changes how we spend money. It changes how we view people who are different from us. It changes even how we respond to those who are full of deceit and trickery and who harm us. Christ changes *us* from the inside, out, and this gives us the power to change the world.

And so, we really can become good shepherds. Shepherds of the Church. Shepherds of our neighborhoods. Shepherds of those who are the most vulnerable in our society. Good shepherds who put the well-being of the whole community above our own wants and fears. Above our own self-preservation.

With Peter, Paul, and Sallie...we are all called to be messengers of the good news of Jesus. Even though we have made mistakes. Even though we have denied Jesus. Even though we have hurt people. Even though we are girls, or uneducated, or too young, or too old, or whatever.... we are all called. Because God loves us. God forgives us. God chooses *us* to be a part of God's mission. And this changes everything. Amen.