

“Out-N-In-N-Out”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 6, 2022 – The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

Dear friends, here we find ourselves together, on this chilly winter morning, nearly two years in to “these pandemic times,” dealing with too many realities that were formerly unprecedented, but have now become common. Our new normal is to live with frustrating disruptions, shortages, restrictions, disagreements, and divisions over seemingly everything, leading many of us to become angry and bitter, and too many of us to act out in destructive fits of rage. Perhaps you saw that just a week ago, at a buffet restaurant just outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a 40-person brawl broke out, with people throwing punches, tables, and even high chairs at one another, all because the buffet ran out of steak!

We live in times that remind us all too often of the assessments of Isaiah and Peter that we read in today’s scripture lessons: *We are* a sinful people of unclean lips and actions. We live in ways that are far different than the loving ways our loving creator intended for us to live, and our selfish actions lead us to separation from one another and from God.

One of the reasons we come together each week is to remind ourselves of the good news we share, that God still loves us and calls us as we are, in our familiar - - and unprecedented -- brokenness and uncleanness, to come close. Though wholly unholy, we are invited to have fellowship with the holy God, and when we come close to God, we can be changed, like Simon the harvester of fish, who became Peter the gatherer of people.

Speaking of changes, earlier this week, the professional football team in Washington, DC made a long-overdue change, taking on a new name, the Washington Commanders. The team’s old name, which was a derogatory slur for Native Americans and deeply hurtful for many, was retired, in spite of the long-held stance of the team’s owner to never change it, only after the team’s main corporate sponsor applied pressure on it to change. By the way, this, corporate pressure, seems to be an effective avenue to enacting real, positive change in our

times, and gives me hope, that by applying pressure on corporations to make changes and applying pressure on them to apply pressure on others to change can have a broad impact for good in our world.

Though the Washington Football Team, is now, thankfully, called by a new name, their calling remains the same. But imagine if their vocation changed as well. What if the Commanders were called to give up playing American football to playing the kind of football that the rest of world plays? That would be an even bigger, more profound change, and it would change, especially, the bodies of the big, burly linemen, who would certainly become reshaped as they ran up, down, and all around a soccer field.

It is this kind of change -- a change not only in name, but a radical, complete alteration of identity and activity -- that is made in the lives of people who come into the presence of God's holiness. When we, like Simon Peter and the sons of Zebedee, step into the boat where Jesus is, and we give up our ways of doing things to do them as he calls us to do them, going out to deeper water when he calls us to do so and dropping our nets where he calls us to do so, the miracle of transformation happens in our lives.

This miracle is God's gift to us. God graciously calls us in to change us, and then God calls us to go out to bring others in to receive the gift of transformed lives.

Sailing out into deeper waters, though, especially when the waters are unfamiliar or unknown, can be pretty scary. But let us fear not and let us head out, knowing that we are in this boat together with one another and with Christ, the one who calls us and also speaks peace to us, even when the stormy seas rage around us as they certainly will in the deep waters.

This is what we celebrate when we gather to receive communion as we do today. This ritual act reminds us that we are connected to Christ and to one another, that together we are given his name as Christian, and that together we are given his vocation of boldly going out into the world to perform life-transforming miracles. As we receive the sacrament this morning, may we be reminded of our identity and our calling.

And when we leave this room this morning in "these unprecedented times," having been fed by Christ's body, may Christ living in us feed others in new and

unprecedented ways. May we, as individuals and as a church community, never be content to linger near the safe and familiar shore, but boldly, in faith, head out for the deeper waters to which we are called to go. Amen.