

**St. John's Episcopal Church**  
Jackson, Wyoming  
Sermon for June 19, 2016 ~ Proper 7C  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Your long transition between settled rectors is about to be completed as your new rector arrives next month. Our time together is drawing to its conclusion.

These seventeen months have been filled with progress in the work of transition and in preparation to receive a new rector. They have been a blessing to Gay and to me. And Jimmy Bartz's time with you will be a blessing to him and his family. Getting to know you and this beautiful community has enriched and changed our lives in important ways. The same will happen with Jimmy in his years with you. You have made a place for us and extended generous hospitality to us. And you will do that for Jimmy as well. You have allowed us to care for you and to guide you through some challenging adjustments. Jimmy will want to be able to do that also. We hope and pray that our time together has also enriched you and changed you in ways that will make it possible for you to consecrate yourselves to a new era of ministry with your new rector. What an opportunity! What an adventure this is going to be! Gay and I have reserved seats in the bleachers and will be watching in anticipation and cheering you on with a great cloud of witnesses as you continue to do great things for God and your neighbors as the leading Episcopal Church in Wyoming.

I realize that for some of you, none of this transition has been appealing. The changes that lie ahead of you may not be any more appealing. At least you've had a chance to practice with me! Christians everywhere, truthfully, have a tendency to become set in their ways and to resist change, even when it is inevitable, inescapable, or desirable.

However, the changes that happen in this or any church during a time of transition are nothing compared with the changes that are so desperately needed in the world around us. Our news media have been chock full of shocking examples of how things need to change. The headlines during the last two weeks have heralded stories of political strife, racial and ethnic conflicts, poverty and injustice, abuse of power, desperation, and violence. The murder of a Member of Parliament and the mass shooting in Orlando, the untimely death of a youth in this community, the eviction of three hundred of our neighbors from residences that will never be available to people in their socioeconomic strata again, are but a few examples that things need to change.

And, lest you think that the Church doesn't have any responsibility for involvement in that change, I direct your attention to that part of the catechism that declares, "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." That is our imperative! That's what the Church is for. Ongoing changes in our common life are necessary in order for us to be God's instrument of change for the reconciliation of the world at our doorstep. The involvement of the people of this parish in the Cuban Mission, La Gran Familia, the Library Snack Program, the Prevent Gun Violence Vigil, the Jackson Cupboard, Latino Resource Center, Community Resource Center, Browse 'n' Buy, and the Diocese of Wyoming are examples of how you are indeed taking action.

Over the last few months, I've had an inner struggle that I have shared only with Gay and a few others. My struggle was prompted by my realization that this is the healthiest congregation I have served in forty-four years in ordained ministry. Recognizing that, I wondered if I should retire because I can't believe it will ever get any better than this. The Wardens and Vestry, this amazing staff (most of whom are young enough to be my children), my clergy colleagues, Bishop Smylie and his staff, the committees, guilds,

ministry groups and their leaders, the Liturgical Ministers, the Musicians, the children and youth, the Healing Ministers, and, of course, last but not least, the exceptional coffee, make St. John's a whole and holy community of people in the Episcopalian branch of the Jesus Movement. Perfect? Of course not! But you are steadily moving in that direction, toward maturity in your faith and in your life together. You are growing spiritually and the fruit of that is evident. As Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16).

I want to encourage you to continue and I also appeal to you today to do even more in expanded involvement and funding in these endeavors, in advocacy that addresses wealth inequality, housing, racism, and injustice, and in continued efforts to strengthen the spiritual health and quality of your life together. As today's readings remind us, this is the heritage of the People of God.

God does most of the work. That's the hard part for us. It's about grace. It's about trusting God to change us so we can change the world. We'd rather read a self-help manual and fix ourselves up. But the truth of the gospel and the good news of the gospel is that God does most of the work. The Church is here week after week to remind us of that. How can we experience this lifelong process of mental revolution that can impact the evil forces of this world, such as poverty, racism, and injustice?

Desire it. Admit that you can't save yourself or save the world by yourself. Believe that the One who is greater than you can transform you. Continually turn your life and the life of your Church over to him. Believe that the best years of St. John's Episcopal Church in Jackson Hole are in the future that God is setting before you.

That One, Jesus Christ, is here to meet us at his Table. Whether our attitude is right or not, he is always here. But when we come desiring, admitting, believing, surrendering, when we are as receptive and trusting as children, when we receive him in this way, it is the first step in the journey *from* slavery – to the past, to hurts, to disappointments, to prejudices, to the way we've always done it – *to* the glorious liberty which is the destiny and the inheritance of the children of God. You don't want to shortchange yourself.

One day at a place called Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his followers, "Who do you say that I am" (Mt. 16:15)? In that spirit, I invite you to ask yourselves every day, "Who is Jesus Christ and what difference does he make?" There are answers to that question in the Scriptures and in the confessions of the Church. But it is imperative that the question be answered again and again in the heart of each disciple and each congregation from generation to generation in our ongoing pilgrimage from slavery to freedom. For it is in that living, giving relationship that the Word again takes on flesh and dwells among the people who live in the mission field at the doorstep of this church.

I remind you one last time – Those doors open outwards and so do your lives. What happens in here is to equip and empower us to be the Body of Christ out there. We receive Word and Sacrament so that we might become Word and Sacrament in a world of hurt, of today and tomorrow, not that of yesterday. And, the good news for St. John's is that God still has a unique mission for you that no other faith community has been called to serve in this part of Creation. Freely you have received. So freely give. Don't hold back. God will be glorified, that glory will be reflected in your life together, lives will be transformed, and you will become the change that changes the world!

So, your new Rector, who was elected during prayer in this very room, is on his way to you. I know you will receive him and his family with the same radical hospitality and extravagant generosity you have extended to Gay and me. As I think about this church in this verdant valley, blanketed by

beautiful flowers and foliage, teeming with life, and surrounded by a wall of mountains, the words of a hymn come to mind. They describe God's Church as a beautiful and fruitful garden. I want to share it with you in closing, with a heart that is grateful for the privilege of living in this garden with you for awhile and a prayer that your continuing ministry will indeed bear delicious, nutritious, abundant fruit:

Christ hath a garden walled around,  
A Paradise of fruitful ground,  
Chosen by love and fenced by grace  
From out the world's wide wilderness.

Like trees of spice his servants stand,  
There planted by his mighty hand;  
By Eden's gracious streams, that flow  
To feed their beauty where they grow.

Awake, O wind of heav'n and bear  
Their sweetest perfume through the air:  
Stir up, O south, the boughs that bloom,  
Till the beloved Master come:

That he may come, and linger yet  
Among the trees that he hath set;  
That he may evermore be seen  
To walk amid the springing green.