



SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

At the Intersection of Change and Expectation

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

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Nadia Bolz-Weber is not your typical Lutheran Pastor. After graduating from Seminary, she started a church in her living room, The House for Sinners and Saints. Like all new adventures this one started off with big hopes and an uphill battle. Underfunded, and often desperate, Nadia had come to the ministry after a fairly difficult earlier life, battling addiction and a more than difficult childhood, this tattooed, feisty and often profane woman, who can, she reminds her congregation, jerk and lift 150 pounds clean over her head at the gym, wanted to start a church that spoke to those who were like her. Spiritual but not necessarily religious, people who really had given up on religion altogether. She said that “once I realized I could be both a saint and a sinner and 100% me, I knew I had a ministry.” And what a ministry it has been. From the very beginning House for Sinners and Saints has welcomed those who you would not expect to find in a church; gang members, drag queens, single mothers, transsexual people, and those who were looking for a spiritual home that fed them with living spirit and trusted them to make the church as it would be. The church has grown to several hundred and now occupies a beautiful neo-gothic old church in Denver.

Part of the magic to House is Nadia’s theology: She believes in a gritty god, a god that is where the pain and brokenness lies. She does everything a Lutheran pastor should do, heavy on the liturgy but light on the guilt. Most of all, House for Sinners and Saints not only welcomes who you are, but expects you to participate in the church. Nadia says “we don’t really do committees” I just stand up on a Sunday and ask “who would like to help me plan the Christmas service and 20 people, who would never be caught dead on a committee are working with me on the service”.

House for Sinners and Saints lives by the motto “we are anti-excellence but pro-participation”. Anti-excellence but pro-participation. I have been praying on that message this week. What would that mean for us a people of faith to be anti-excellence and pro-participation? Well, it would mean we would change into something different than we are now. Not that I have anything against excellence. But this is a congregation that strives hard to be the best we can be. We have an excellent music ministry, an excellent board, excellent staff and 46 committees and teams dedicated to us being a most excellent congregation. Now isn't that just excellent?

So I am not willing to give up on being who we are at our best. But what would happen if we worried less about being excellent and more about having each and every one of us participating in the life of our congregation? I predict more people would feel at home here than ever before. Last Sunday we had our first Family Friendly Service of the New Year. Who was here? Wasn't that fun? Nate rolled out the big screen and told his story with power point slides, the kids were fascinated and the adults were all leaning in to the experience. Shelly led a Buddhist Loving Kindness meditation aimed at all ages. I told a story as my sermon, Ed and the choir sang with us in love and then kids and adults gathered on the chancel with drums, guitars, flutes, violins, and French Horns and we all sang “I Can see Clearly Now. The best part of the service for me? The energy. The fact that all of us were deeply engaged in worship. Not as something performed for us but something we made together. That is what Nadia means by pro-participation.

Now I am not going to dissolve all our committees and trust in the Holy Spirit to run this large complex organization. But I am going to embrace a new change in how we are becoming. Change not for the sake of change, but as a means to a new end, the end of being a vital and engaged multigenerational spiritual community.

Change is not easy. Our lives seem hard enough without a lot of change coming down on us. We want our lives to be at least a little predictable, no? That is what we expect. One of

the reasons we become so anxious is that our world, our lives, are not what we all expect them to be. Nobody expects cancer, nobody expects our relationships to crash and burn, nobody expects a car accident. Change seems to fly in the face of our expectations. The greater our expectations, the more painful and unsettling change can seem. The intersection of expectation and change is not a happy place, most of the time. Who expected 9/11 when this very church lost beloved members in the Twin Towers Collapse? That event and so many others since then changed us, perhaps made us a little stronger, and perhaps made us a little more afraid. None of us really expected Donald Trump to be elected President, least of all him! I will always remember when he was photographed in a meeting with President Obama. He looked miserable, lost and perhaps scared stiff that he was now President. All he wanted to do was boost his brand a bit and now what?

Well, we all know what the “now what” became. All of our expectations about civility and compassion and love turned on their heads. So much change in our national character that we hardly recognize our country anymore. Or did we ever see it for it was? Because as many contend, “America is not America yet to me”, in the words of Langston Hughes. What we might have thought of as a new era of Hope with the election of President Obama, masked the raw reality of desperation that many in our country face every day. Joblessness, underemployment, lack of health care, drugs, the shortcomings of capitalism that leaves the poor poorer and the rich growing ever richer. Regardless of who is President, the fact remains that the world we thought we were creating, is not the world that many, including many in this room experience. We might all expect to go home to a safe and warm home but there are some, even some among you now that face the struggle of inadequate housing, debt beyond their means, empty relationships and loneliness. Our struggles are real. Indeed, as the Buddha reminds me, expecting struggle is much more the norm than not.

So how then do we individually and collectively both embrace change and find a way beyond all that is wrong around us? As your pastor I have no illusions that you are not hurting. I know you are. I know I am. I believe we can expect something better when we live our lives, when we worship the God of tender mercies found within these walls. Being pro-participation is my big change for us this year. In the Capital Campaign which will bring new life to our beloved church, in the way we are embracing families again, in the music which we sing, in the causes we take to the streets, in the shoulders we cry on, the hands we touch, the candles of struggle and sorrow we bear. Because I know one thing about us: We are truly – and I mean truly – better together than apart.

Change is the event, but growth is the process. In other words, in order to grow we have to change. And that is really why I am called to be here as your minister. Because the trouble with chance taking, while it is certain to help us grow into deeper people (even when we fail, perhaps especially when we fail), it is after all still a chance. Change doesn't always work out for the best. Growing with change happens best when we employ three great forces in our lives: Deciding, trusting, and having faith.

First to deciding. Deciding to take the chance is the hardest part of the process. What is your possible dream? When I opened my first business in 1980, I was a dreamy young man filled with visions of grandeur, changing the world with my little solar energy company in rural Iowa. With \$10,000 borrowed from a bank, a 1966 bright orange GMC pickup with a big sun on the door, I would tear down country roads knocking on the doors of farmers trying to sell them solar panels. I didn't have much of a business plan (lord knows how the bank lent me that money) just guts and gumption. I managed to hold it together until Ronald Reagan became president and the tax credits dried up, then so did the business and my first marriage. Not a good year. I had decided but I had not imagined the possible dream.

To do that we have to actually start with the worst case scenario. What would happen if my business didn't work? What would happen if I failed? Bankruptcy? No, I came close, but no. *If you can live with the worst you can take the chance on the best.* Which is in fact what happened. It was a sad day as the auctioneer sold off all my inventory and the store. Did I make a bad decision? No, not really. I expected to do better than I did but then who would start anything if they did not expect to do better than they did. Businesses start and fail every day. Giving that chance of success why do people start a business? Because you will become a wiser and more grounded person because you took the chance. I tell people who have lost businesses that none of their time and money was really wasted. It didn't turn out the way you expected it to turn out but you felt the thrill of opening, you learned the lessons of losing and most of all you gave it your all to a cause you believed to be good and right and true.

Embracing the power of change requires that we trust ourselves and each other. I know this for a fact: congregations who trust in their leaders thrive, those that don't falter. Now when I came here four years ago, there was some distrust in the system. Am I right? I could tell by the way you governed yourselves. The Board was elected, the nominating committee was elected, the Endowment committee was elected and the Committee on Ministries was elected. Most congregations just elect a board of trustees and the board appoints all these other committees but not here. Why was that? Well in short, you didn't trust one another. You wanted each of these major decision makers to be responsible solely to the congregation, not to the Board. I will say we have come a long way since then. We mostly trust one another and our leaders. We can still be hard on our leaders which pains me still but now communicate with one another quite openly. Not so much so that you have changed your constitution yet but we will get there. Trust has to be earned. Trust implies that we are open about what we are doing and willing to admit our mistakes. Admitting our mistakes turns out to be really, really important in embracing change. If we make a mistake we need to own and promise to do better. I had to learn this the hard way. In one of my early ministries I disbanded the music committee on the

theory that if I did away with all the infighting we would do better. I didn't ask anyone, I just did it. Yeah, not such a good idea. There really were reasons they were fighting and those reasons didn't change. The board was furious, the problem was still there and I was in trouble. I called up a senior colleague, "what should I do?" She said, "Apologize and promise to do better." What? That's it? Yep, that's it. Turns out that humility is part of the path towards better change. And it builds trust.

Finally, my dear ones, change requires faith. The willingness to suspend our fears and step boldly into the unknown. At the intersection of change and expectation lie faith and the hope. Faith entails requires us to move beyond our fears. Faith will call us into this place, with our broken and messy selves, faith will call us to reveal that God that we know as love, faith will gives us the strength to stand up to tyranny and incivility. In her book Beyond the Good News, Nancy McDonald Ladd writes: "Faith and hope are the exact opposites of certainty. (They) do not presume an outcome for good or ill. (They) lie in the waiting moment when the tug from both directions is not fully resolved and when a great many things are possible. (They) move in the humble spaces that open when we allow ourselves to be uncertain.....It is the possibility though not the inevitability of a better way." (Nancy McDonald Ladd, After the Good News Skinner House, 2019)

Nadia Bolz-Weber left the ministry of House for all Sinners and Saints in 2018. This happens often to superstar preachers who become famous writers. She is not taking another church, she just knew her work as founder was done. Change comes in many forms. In her farewell letter to the congregation she wrote: "I invite you to come to church for my farewell liturgy and what I can only assume will also be an epic dance party with red velvet cake, ...Actually I invite you to church every Sunday before I leave – and every Sunday after I leave ... Seriously. Get your asses to church."

I have no plans to leave you. In many ways our ministry together is just getting started. But I do want you to remember how important being one in this sacred place is to who

we are and what we want to become. And seriously, keep bringing yourselves to church. This is fun and serious you know, all at the same time. We are the change agents for the beloved world we dream of. You, all of you, sitting out there, right now. Shanti, shalom and amen.