

“Christian in Transition”: Waiting

Introduction:

To talk about transitions well is an interesting thing for me, because I don't transition well. I transition in fits and starts, with faithfulness, trust in God alternating with, you know, despair. I'm an "all or nothing" person, and to be all or nothing, is to be terrible at transitions, because transitions are, by their nature, in between things. You can't be all in or all out in a transition, because to be all in is to go back to something that you can't go back to, or to go forward to something that isn't there. To be all out isn't possible; at least, not if others depend on us, right? And we all have people who depend on us for something.

So I want to offer us the tiny little bit of wisdom that I've gained from the tiny little bit of transition that I've done half-well, the transition that I've been present with others through, and the transitions of my own family. I offer it with fear and trembling, hoping this morning is useful to God and us.

We're going to talk about the effects of transition and how to keep the faith during transitions in our lives-- basically how to transition well as Christians.

Not Doing:

And I'm not going to define transitions for us this

morning, or do a lot of set up. Transition is one of those “you know it when you see it” things. The rhythms and routines of our life get thrown off, because the fundamental things that make up our lives--our physical capabilities, our work, play, or rest, the people who live under our roofs--change. And so we find ourselves in transition, hoping that we navigate the change from back then to up ahead well, with faith.

Prayer:

Effects: Diminishment

It is very easy, when we are leaving behind a season of life, with its regular routines, to feel less empowered.

To lose almost any routine, for most of us, is a disempowering experience. We gain strength that we often don't realize from the regular, whether that's our regular way of driving to work, our regular pattern of getting up and starting our day, our regular breakfasts in their regular places, our regular evenings with those regular things that fill them.

Familiarity doesn't always breed contempt; sometimes it breeds dependability, contentment, comfort, health. Any transition will disrupt what's regular to us; if

nothing else, we'll wake up from our routine and notice it, which takes energy. Part of the strength that our regular routines provide for us is simply that we don't have to think, much, anymore about what to do when we're in the middle of them; we just get life done. And that can be a gift in a world that takes increasing competency and energy from us simply to navigate the speed and demands of life. Paul's advice that we "aspire to live quietly, to mind our own affairs, and to work with our hands," is good advice, because a life like that positions us for more routine than a loud, nosy, dishonest life.

I'm a terrible dancer, terrible singer, I can't keep a beat, you know? God may be more glorified by my silence than if I pull out my harp and lyre; my joyful noise is a little bit angry cat. But when I find a rhythm, it's nice, it's good; it's empowering; when I lose it, because of some change, and I have to start all over again, it weakens me. Every transition brings with it a little bit of starting all over again; any time our rhythms of life are disrupted, this happens to us--and it feels like it happens to us, against us.

Effects: Disorientation

And too much transition, too much movement to quickly disorients us. This disorientation goes hand-to-glove with disempowerment, but it's different enough to point out particularly.

We get what it means to be disoriented, right? We lose sense of what we're aiming toward, why we do what we do, why use our time, money, talents the way we use them. Transition--even a bit, but especially a lot of it, mix work, relationship, health transitions together--but transition disrupts our orientation, it disrupts our sense of calling and why we do what we do.

We end up confused about why we're living the way we're living.

And transition, which involves the move from one rhythm of life to another, demands, if it's to be done well, a strong sense of direction. I think, I think it does. This is particularly true if the transitions we're making are ones that we've chosen. It's easy to get bogged down, spin our wheels, tread water, when we've forgotten our motivation for the changes we've invited into our lives.

Effects: Isolation

Beyond disempowerment and disorientation, transition can isolate us. And this is for all the same reasons as these other two affects. To lose touch with what was, because of changes in our life, is to lose touch, often with people.

Now: We've got Facebook, Twitter, Skype--a dozen ways to keep in touch when keeping in touch isn't something that just happens the way it used to.

But we all have friends, and then we have friends, you know? We all have acquaintances and confidants, and in a world of increasing acquaintances, who themselves share with us increasing amounts of information, it's remarkable how rare a confidant, an intimate, dependable, always-loving friend, is becoming. Transition can break these already sensitive relational ties. We move and don't see the people we saw. We change jobs and don't see the people who had become our friends. We face new, demanding needs from children or parents and simply, as a function of our limited capacity as people, don't get as much time with friendships as we did.

Effects: Flight, Fright, Freeze:

Transitioning from one thing to another means a loss of control, almost always. Even if the move from one situation to the next is a move that we've chosen, that we feel God is totally affirming--it still necessarily includes a loss of control.

And when we people sense we're losing control, we do a few things: we freeze, and try to pin down whatever we can pin down around us. We run, flee, and try to escape the anxiety we feel. Or we fight, lash out with anger against--whatever it might be.

Now, all of these things are true to life in a broken world. But they often become more true when we're in

the middle of transitions, between what was and what will be.

For some of us, when we lose control of our life rhythms we lash out. We find ourselves irritable, ready to argue with our families, bitter at our friends, frustrated with the dog. We honk in rage against the person who cuts us off in traffic. And people we love notice: "You haven't been yourself lately?" Yeah, because my self, which is so wrapped up in my routines, went out the window when I lost them.

Others of us freeze, and try to pin down whatever we can grab and keep the same, to keep that sense of control that we very really are losing in the transition we're in. We watch the same tv show every day; we binge on food, pornography, exercise, because they make us feel like we're in charge. We become rigid and legalistic about rights and wrongs.

Or, we find ourselves in the middle of a transition, and simply unable to complete it. We're stuck in the middle, unable to make the commitments, the choices, that would see us to the future, and so we linger, no longer there, behind us, and unwilling to commit to a future.

Others of us try to return back to what was. We recreate around us as much of our old routine as we're able, and ignore the ways our patterns, habits, don't

fit our new situation. We lie to ourselves that things haven't changed, and because of it, we can't really transition into what's new. We leave things unresolved, and pretend that our old way of life with it's old people in its old places is still possible, when it's not.

Why It Matters To Name These Effects:

It matters for us to name what transition can cause--the disempowerment, the disorientation, the isolation and loss of control, with our various responses to that. We have to be able to own that we respond this way.

It took me until, oh, I was married, to realize that you can't treat a virus with antibiotics. I just didn't know. You know, being sick is being sick, right?

It's not, though, of course. And the details matter: knowing what's going on with us matters for how we respond to it.

And if it happens that some of us are facing transitions, or in the middle of great change, and just also happen to be feeling disempowered, or isolated, or disoriented--we're lashing out, we're trying to cling to the past, we're increasingly inflexible or noncommittal--then maybe these things are connected. Maybe the reason for the way we've been feeling and behaving is related to the transition we're in.

And once we can connect these things, the symptoms and the cause, we can figure out a way to treat the cause, right? Treat the disease and the symptoms go away--in the best case.

Treatment For Transition?

And treatment isn't just, you know: Get on with it. Move forward. Get out of transition.

But it might be, sometimes. Sometimes we people, especially people of faith, who want to be faithful, we deliberate and deliberate and deliberate because it feels like it's more faithful to waffle, to hold off on making a decision. It's Christian due diligence. You're not supposed to move too quickly, somehow, with decisions. You can't trust yourself, or your wise counsel, because: Sin. The Devil.

Often, of course, the changes in our lives aren't ones that we have control over, and we're waiting, simply waiting, for the transition we're in to end, for the new job to come, the baby to grow up, our family members to feel better. We're waiting for new rhythms and routines to replace the old ones.

The trouble with this is that waiting isn't something any of us are naturally good at. We might be supernaturally good at it; we may have lived faithfully through enough of life's mess to realize that the Spirit

is with us, God is for us, Good will be made of what we're in, and the pain of this moment will be redeemed.

The deep problem with navigating a transition well is that it is, fundamentally, about coping, not solution. We rarely, rarely can just move forward the way we want to in life. We are waiting on others, and most truly, if we're trying to transition Christianly, we're waiting on the Lord.

Waiting on the Lord:

Our ways of coping may be the negative things I already mentioned. And Nostalgia, Food, Work-- anything can be something we use to deal with stress, right? Because almost anything is, in our dysfunctional society, rewarded by someone. All we have to do is find someone to praise us for the negative thing we're doing. A thing which ultimately is a replacement for the most basic of Christian tasks:

Waiting upon the Lord. Trusting God when we cannot see the end of the path.

Believing, as Psalm 23 says,

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

***2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,***

3 he refreshes my soul.

***He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.***

***4 Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,[a]
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.***

***5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.***

***6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.***

The Worst:

Being in the middle of a significant life transition--and significance is often personal, it may be different for you than for me, depending on all sorts of things, but being in the middle of a significant life transition is one of the worst places to be: it's no fun, it does to us all the things I've already mentioned, and it deeply tests faith and faithfulness.

But we are in the middle of things. And we are facing transitions that have begun, and we don't know how they will end, or when they will end. Our rhythms have been thrown off, and our routines are changing,

maybe too quickly, maybe too slowly, but it's the change that's the trouble.

So what can we do? What can we do to wait upon the Lord in the middle of our transitions in life? To keep on keeping on, when what we'd rather do is escape the uncomfortable moment, and what we often do is end up disoriented, disempowered, isolated, or acting out in some negative way?

What are we doing now?

What do we already do?

I could ask, "What do we do already?" of course; I am speaking to a group of Christians, many of whom have followed the Lord for years, and many of us have survived all sorts of major life transition, and not only survived it, but learned to grow through it. Can you remember what you've already done, what you tend to do, to keep faith and wait upon the Lord during seasons of transition? Is it leaning into Scripture? Prayer? Worship? Fellowship? I know it's something; what is it? How are you "waiting upon the Lord?" if you're in a season of waiting?

I only have one thing that I've been thinking about it, and it may seem weak to us.

Keeping Faith:

I think, sometimes, keeping faith during life transitions can be synonymous with keeping our sense of self. In

many ways what a transition does is simply cause us to lose ourselves for awhile. Our strengths, our pleasures, ourselves. It's not that our trust in God decreases in some special way; it just goes along with everything else.

And so to keep faith during major, major transitions may simply look like continuing on in whatever routines we can continue on in. Does this make sense? It's not clever. We just keep doing whatever routines we can keep doing.

It would probably be too small a thing to say that having dinner between 5:45 and 6:30 every night with Bo and Carolyn since Bo was born has saved me. That's ridiculous, right? But, I dunno. I don't know if I'd be me without it. We've transitioned through multiple job changes, permanently impactful accidents, school starts and stops, deaths and adoption of pets. All sorts of things.

The miracle that comes when we cling to any routines we can during transitions in our lives is that we do find, when we look back, that we kept the faith. We look back on the transition from a place of faithfulness.

This is why the Church talks about living a life of Spiritual Discipline when things are routine, so that during those times of major change, we can find strength and dependability and keep ourselves going

in the regular faith habits we've developed--like regular prayer, routine Bible reading, regular meeting with Christians.

But it's no small thing to be able to continue to have dinner every day at the same time, or continue to swim every week at the same time, or continue to read for pleasure, mow the lawn, do chores or go shopping. To pass through a life transition well, by which I mean to keep faith, demands that we keep some part of our lives intact, as seeds from which God will regrow great faith, great trust, all the things that make up what it means to be a Christian.

These are the questions, then, that I'd leave us with, I think.

Questions:

First of all, what transitions in your life are facing on the horizon, or in the middle of right now?

How will you keep the faith, "wait upon the Lord," during the time of transition? How are you keeping faith right now?

What regular things can you cling to during these times of change that, frankly, can give a structure to your life upon which your faith can grow? What chores, good habits, pleasures can you keep doing even when life becomes disempowering, confusing, isolating, and

you lose control--and control of your behavior? What regular things can you cling to during these times of change that, once you have transitioned, God can use to build your life again, build you up again, and grow your faith?

Conclusion:

And my very last note is this: Some of us have been waiting upon the Lord for so long--waiting for that one thing to happen, that one illness to be healed, that one hope to be realized--that we've lost touch with any routines that we had before our transition began. It's important, if we're in that place, long past our pre-change routines, that we try if we can to create some that can bless us, build us, and can be regular, expected things in our change-filled lives.

To talk about transitions is to talk about the human condition, I think. There's so much more we could consider. I hope that we can, no matter what transition we're in or we're facing in the coming months, do whatever we are able to keep faith until the next thing comes, resting on whatever routines we're able to take strength in.