

“Opening To Change” Sermon by Emily Richards, delivered March 10, 2024

Here we sit, our bodies filling this space, a part of this life where change is constant.

But even knowing that everything changes, day by day, year by year, moment by moment, that doesn't always make the changes easier.

Some changes come because we want them, desperately striving. Some come that we don't want, never asked for, or expected. And some come creeping slowly and inevitably barely noticeable until suddenly there they are.

And sometimes, change, transformation, requires help. It requires opening up to the possibilities, but also to being able to reach out for assistance when we need it, which can, in and of itself, require a change.

I don't remember a time, even as a child, when I liked my body. My memories of elementary school include occasional unkind words from other children about the size and shape of my body. It wasn't constant, but enough to remind me that this form, even then, didn't adhere to the waif thin beauty standards of society.

Or, more frequently, the adults around me who felt entitled to comment on my size, weight, and shape. Sometimes to me, but more often to the other adults who were present. A reminder to myself that our children are always listening.

At some point my dad gave me the nickname Bubba. And I hated it. But 8 or 9 year old Emily couldn't exactly articulate why so I would just respond with “don't call me that” or “I don't like that” and he would apologize and then just do it again later. And I have no doubt that it was never malicious on his part. But, what I realized at some point as an adult was, to me it always felt like he was making fun of me for being fat. Which I highly doubt had anything to do with the nickname at all. But, that was what it felt like.

And when I look at pictures of myself as a kid now, I see a healthy normal sized child. Sure my belly was a little round, but I'm sure I fell within the normal weight range for a kid my age.

Something, according to BMI charts, I've never achieved as an adult.

I know many of you have noticed, since several of you have commented on it, or asked me about it, and yes, I have been losing weight. But it's not due to dieting, I'm not starving myself or exercising obsessively, and I have done both of those things. It's because I'm on a medication for people who are chronically overweight.

Sometimes transformation only happens when we are able to ask for help.

In the past when I have lost a noticeable amount of weight, which has happened many times, I loved it when people commented on it. I had worked so hard to get to whatever new, lower, weight I happened to be at. A place I never managed to stay. Comments about how much thinner I looked felt like compliments.

But now it actually makes me uncomfortable. And I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because this doesn't feel like work. I don't track my food. I'm not exercising more. I'm just listening to my body's new needs and taking it day by day.

And it's been interesting to experience what I assume it must be like for people who haven't lived the life that I have, who don't inhabit this body, struggling with weight since before I can remember.

A friend of mine, who actually told me about this medication when she and her wife started taking it over a year ago, described it aptly as a quieting of the food noise.

Don't get me wrong, I still like food. It tastes good to me. I still eat chocolate every day, just a little bit. I just don't think about it like I used to. Neither am I obsessively counting every calorie, weighing each piece of food that goes into my body, nor am I binging on junk because I'm too tired to even think about what is or isn't good for me. Or, as another friend likes to describe it, eating my feelings.

And, I want to be clear that this still hasn't been easy. The side effects from the medication have been unpleasant and unpredictable.

A month or so ago when I was talking to my sister about this new journey of mine she asked how long I would need to be on this medication. I answered, forever. And by her expression it was pretty clear that she was horrified. That she couldn't imagine why I would want to be trapped into taking something for the rest of my life.

But to me it doesn't feel like a cage, it feels freeing. Freeing because the parts of me that couldn't stop thinking about food, too much, too little, how often, what kind, are quiet.

And freeing because this medication works by stimulating a hormone that already exists in my body. One that, it turns out, my body simply doesn't produce as much of as some other bodies.

And, as I'm sure many of you have noticed even if you haven't experienced it, there is a deep rooted shame that comes with being overweight in this society. We are told over and over again that being fat is simply a lack of willpower. That if we just ate a healthier diet and exercised more we could be slim. That it's our fault.

But, it turns out, that weight is actually mostly based on physiological differences, not some moral failing.

Did you know that doctors prescribe diet and exercise as the most prevalent treatment for obesity but that it has a failure rate of over 80%? And I wonder, what other treatment can you possibly imagine would continue to be prescribed to millions of people that is successful less than 20% of the time?

And maybe you have never struggled with your weight. But I know that we all struggle with something when it comes to these physical forms that we inhabit.

Maybe it's actually hard for you to gain weight, and you have experienced body shaming for being seen as too skinny.

Maybe it's the shape of your nose, how far your ears stick out, or the color or texture of your hair. Maybe it's the loss of that hair, or the grey that has taken the place of what once was red, blonde, or brown.

Or the lines on your face that you see looking back from the mirror that somehow crept up on you over the years.

Or the gentle sag of flesh that used to be firm.

Maybe it's your teeth, crooked or stained, repaired or replaced, or missing.

We all have those parts of ourselves that we struggle to love.

And I wouldn't say that I love my body more now that there is slightly less of it. I do not feel shamelessly embodied. I'm not sure that I ever will. But I'm working on it.

And to start this change I had to be willing to reach out and say, I need help.

We all need help sometimes. Whether it is through medication, seeing a counselor, utilizing social services, visiting a food pantry, contacting the Care Team, or any number of other different ways, there is no shame in asking for help.

The Rabbi David Wolf shares this story:

A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. "Do you think if I use all of my strength, I can move this rock?" the child asked. His father answered, "If you use all of your strength, I am sure you can do it." The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, "You were wrong. I can't do it." His father put his arm around the boy's shoulder and said, "No son. You didn't use all your strength – you didn't ask me to help."

Asking for help isn't a weakness, it's a strength. The strength of community is just that, many people coming together to do what we can't do alone.

And sometimes we notice help is needed, we see someone struggling with a task and we step in to assist them in the moment.

But more often we don't know what the challenges are that we are facing, both as individuals and as a community. And we can forget, when we are the ones who feel overwhelmed and sometimes resentful at how hard we're working, that we have to actually ASK for help. Because more often than not, others are simply unaware.

Rev Gretchen Haley says

"Some words are like spells. Bringing them to speech changes everything. Immediately, and then over time, as what is spoken sinks in and becomes a new reality, creates a new world. Words like, I love you. Or I'm trans. Or let's get married. Words like, "I need help, or I'm sorry..."

And being asked for help is actually a gift. A spell being cast. Because we all want to do good in the world. We want to make a difference in the lives of others. That's why we're here, isn't it? And even when we are unable to give what is needed in the moment, just being asked can help us to feel valued.

I wonder how it felt for you in our mediation earlier to be invited to consider if and how you would like to have physical contact with others around you at that moment? And then to seek consent to act on that desire? To ask for what you needed?

A small change, but one that required opening yourself up to receive it. And maybe what you needed was to not be touched. To simply be in your own body. Or maybe you longed to be touched but felt too self-conscious to ask. To reach out, or speak the words, asking for consent and knowing that it might not be given.

Or maybe in that moment you found another whose need matched your own and you were able to connect, body to body, to give and receive.

Did it feel harder to ask, or to not ask? Was the greater challenge for you to open yourself up to receive, or was it to communicate your need to hold your own space sacred in that moment?

We are all engaged in our own constant state of transformation. And I wonder when does the need to change finally outweigh the fear of the pain that it sometimes brings?

Maya Angelou said

"We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty."

Change can be messy. It can be exhilarating. It can even be frightening. And it almost never happens on its own. Even the butterfly needs the strength of the leaf to nourish it, the hard outer shell of the chrysalis to protect it, time and shelter, in order to make its transformation.

Imagine, what changes could you invite in, if you opened yourself up to the possibilities?