

## THRIVING IN A NEW REALITY

### Excerpts From a Paper by Candace Maxwell

As we confront challenges that are technical in nature, we need to implement ways of doing things differently. When we face challenges that are adaptive in nature, however, we must *think* differently, changing our beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and values so that we can be transformed and thrive in a new reality. We must internalize the change itself and determine what is essential to conserve, what must be discarded, and what we must innovate to thrive.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Adaptive Change and the Ministry of Jesus**

How can the life and ministry of Jesus expand our understanding of adaptive change and leadership? Firstly, Jesus *is* the greatest of all adaptive changes, God incarnate. Jesus ushers in a new reality for the world and devotes much of his ministry teaching and leading his disciples and followers into this new reality. Jesus is the working out of the fulfillment of Biblical history, the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God among God's people, the living presence of God's Word.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus calls on his disciples and followers to preserve the beliefs, loyalties and ways of being in the world that matter most; abandon those that no longer serve

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<sup>1</sup> A widely recognized source on adaptive leadership is the work of R. Heifetz, A. Grashow and M. Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2009). This serves as the principal source for discussions of adaptive leadership contained in this paper. Preceding publication of this book, Heifetz and Linsky also authored other books and articles that introduced foundational concepts about adaptive leadership. For example, see "A Survival Guide for Leaders," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2002.

God and God's people; and take on new ways of thinking and being to thrive in the new reality of the Kingdom of God. Consider a few examples below.

**A new reality of the law.** Jesus preserves the law, yet newly interprets how to live under the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that he upholds the Old Testament law. Yet he also contrasts his teachings about the law with many common interpretations of the day: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Departing from legalistic interpretations of the law, Jesus reveals the true intent – to write the law on the hearts of his followers. For example, on the Sabbath he heals a man with a withered hand (Matthew 12:9-14) and a crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17). For Jesus, truth and compassion for the other takes precedence over the literal interpretation of the law: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Jesus turns many assumptions of the day about the law upside down, describing a new way to live that is more radical than anything before his time – a way to live in his new reality.

**A new reality of the Messiah.** Jesus calls on his disciples to abandon their expectations concerning the Messiah and to embrace the suffering servant. At the time of Jesus' ministry, the Jews were under occupation by the Roman Empire. The people of Israel were hoping for and expecting a military leader to restore their power as a people, just as they had experienced in King David's era. The disciples were no different. They were convinced that a militant Jewish king was the solution to their bondage (a technical solution to their problem). Simon Peter, shortly after declaring "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), rebukes Jesus as Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. Jesus reprimands Peter for clinging

to his former understanding of the Messiah: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Matthew 16:23).

**A new reality of power.** Jesus teaches his disciples new ways of power in the Kingdom of God. Jesus had undeniable power, but he used that power compassionately for the sake of others. He consistently clarified the type of kingdom he came to establish – a kingdom that brought healing and liberation – not political power and might. When approached by John’s disciples, “Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matthew 11:3-5). This paradox of power, authority and servanthood are signature traits of Jesus’ ministry.

These are but a few of the examples in the Gospels where Jesus both embodies and teaches about the essence of adaptive change for a new reality. By looking backward and forward at the same time, Jesus is sifting through the ways of God’s chosen people of Israel; teaching them about what to keep, what to reinterpret and what to leave behind as they live under God’s new covenant with God’s people; and then calling his followers forward into a new and thriving life in God’s kingdom. These are the challenges of adaptive change.

### **Discipleship and the Way of Adaptive Change**

Thriving in the midst of adaptive change requires adopting an iterative process involving three elements. These elements work in harmony, and repeat and build upon each other, based on the ongoing flow of experience and information.

The three elements are:

- Observing, which focuses attention to the events and patterns around you. To make observation as objective as possible, we are encouraged to gain some distance from ourselves and others to discover what is really happening. Heifetz et al refer to this as “getting up on the balcony” and off the dance floor.
- Interpreting, or as Heifetz says, “listening for the song beneath the words,” wherein you consider what you have observed in light of existing beliefs, structures, cultures and attitudes.
- Intervening, wherein you design “experiments” based on your observations and interpretations. Oftentimes these interventions are outside of one’s comfort zone. The goal here is not limited to success, but rather learning and validation. Failure can be an important and valuable outcome of experimentation.

As I consider how he engaged and challenged his disciples to embrace and thrive in his new reality, I can see ways that Jesus embraced this process to guide and support them. For example, he consistently encouraged them to step back and observe their circumstances differently – to think beyond their own pettiness, assumptions and beliefs about thriving in the Kingdom of God. Responding to a dispute among the disciples as to which one was to be regarded as the greatest, Jesus replies that “the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves” (Luke 22:24-27). Certainly this “balcony time” revealed a new pattern, dynamic and reality under God’s Reign.

Jesus spent much of his ministry teaching his disciples to interpret what they saw and heard differently, in light of their evolving experience in the Kingdom of God. For example, Jesus’ teachings on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29) focus on expanded interpretation of Jewish law. Paul followed this approach, exhibiting great ability to interpret the reality of Jesus the Christ based on his audience.

Finally, Jesus encouraged his disciples to experiment. He sent them out, giving them power and authority over demons and to cure diseases (Luke 9:1-6). In this “experiment,” he ordered

them to take nothing with them, to stay where they were welcome and to move on from those places that refused to hear them. Perhaps this was the first public opinion survey ever administered! It certainly informed the disciples about acceptance and interpretation of Jesus' new reality and "on their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done" (Luke 9:10).

These are just few of many examples in the Gospels where Jesus helps his disciples understand and embrace his new reality, based on the process of adaptive change. Most importantly, they experienced a process of discovery and transformation – the hallmarks of our own journey of faith.

### **Jesus, the Adaptive Leader**

Jesus was far from ignorant of the threats associated with the transformational change of his new reality. Intentional or not, the myriad forms of opposition grew out of peoples' aversion to change. From religious authorities to Jesus' disciples and followers, all to varying degrees wanted to restore order, maintain the familiar, protect themselves from pain, and be comfortable again. They experienced a profound sense of loss and dashed expectations. Ultimately, they eliminated the visible agent of change, Jesus himself.

Yet despite these challenges, Jesus' leadership mobilized people to follow him, encouraged his disciples to take on seemingly insurmountable challenges and, ultimately to live in new relationship in God's Kingdom. As we examine the Gospels' account of Jesus' ministry, are there attributes of Jesus' leadership that might help us better navigate the adaptive changes and challenges that we experience today? As Christ's church, what can we learn about adaptive leadership from the One we follow? As I consider these questions, I revisit

selected qualities of adaptive leaders, as expressed by Heifetz et al, and consider the ways in which Jesus exemplified these qualities.

**Jesus was agile.** Guided by an overarching vision and mission, Jesus responded to events as they unfolded. For example, Mark tells the story of Jesus being diverted by a hemorrhaging woman as he is on his way to heal Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43). He stops to heal the woman, then hears of the daughter's death, and nevertheless goes forth and raises the daughter. He remains connected to purpose, while shifting gears to respond to and take advantage of opportunities placed before him.

**Jesus was patient and persistent.** He understood that the transformation of his disciples would not be a clear linear path, but rather one that would be mired with misunderstanding and misdirection. Matthew presents one of many such instances in which the mother of James and John asks Jesus to declare that her sons sit at Jesus right and left in his kingdom (Matthew 20:20-28). Jesus patiently and lovingly responds that she does not know what she is asking, but also uses this as an opportunity to further instruct his disciples about servant discipleship.

**Jesus empowered others.** Jesus' style of leadership, in many respects, is one in which he gave away his power to bring everyone along. Gospel accounts of the feeding of the five thousand describe the disciples, believing they had no power, being awakened to their gifts and harnessing them for good. He understands that in sharing authority with his disciples, as he gives the twelve the authority to cast out demons (Mark 2:14-15), he can draw on their gifts and reach more in his name.

**Jesus embraced conflict.** He understood that conflict is one of the greatest challenges of change, but a necessary part of the change process. For example, he confronts the hypocrisy of religious authorities (Matthew 23:1-39) and heals on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-11). Jesus did not engage in conflict for conflict's sake, however, but rather as a means for leading others into his new reality.

**Jesus was courageous.** He exhibited no sign of intimidation. He was stable and calm in even the most dangerous of situations. Consider, for example, when the chief priests and elders question the authority of Jesus in the temple; he responds masterfully and, in the end, refuses to address their question (Matthew 21:23-27).

**Jesus practiced self-care.** He recognized the depth of intellectual, physical and emotional challenge associated with leading people into his new reality. The Gospels contain many accounts of Jesus going away to pray. He regularly stepped into the inner chamber of his being to find nourishment, and to steady and re-center himself.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus was the greatest of new realities to touch the people of God. As his followers, Jesus calls us to continue the work of his original disciples in continuously adapting to his new reality, in this place and time.

This includes how we live as his church. I believe the Gospel stories compel us to “get up on the balcony” and to observe anew the realities facing our congregations today – not as we desire things to be, but as Christ has placed them before us. We have much to learn from

the teachings of Jesus about ways to navigate these new realities – by honestly interpreting what we see and by trying new ways to thrive while staying connected to purpose.

Before we pick up the latest book or article on best practices and leadership strategies for Christ’s Church, perhaps we should first turn to our most ancient and authoritative source. Surely, Scripture can offer the best “master class” for thriving in God’s Kingdom.