Please, don’t change. Please, hold on to this thing that is at the center of who you are and what you are. There are many things that will certainly change. We will get older. The children will grow in wisdom and strength.

There are things that must change. Fifty years ago most of our leaders in government, business and in the church looked like me: clean-shaven, older white guys with short haircuts. Today our leaders in government, business and in the church are beginning to look like America, plenty of women and men, diverse in age and background and culture and skin tone. There are things that must change, but I really want you to not change, at least not too much.

After four years with you I feel like I know most of you…very well. I know there is something unique and powerful that has brought you to this place in your life. You are the people who are seeking the love of God here in the center of our city. You are the people witnessing the love of God here in the center of our city. Some of you have been here for only a few weeks or a few months, but if you have been part of this congregation for more than a week or two I would guess this is true for you as well. There is something precious in the center of your life. Please, don’t change.

Life often seems to resemble the vision depicted in the ancient hymn we sang/recited a few minutes ago. Why are the nations in an uproar? Why are the people muttering threats against each other? Why do the kings of the earth rise up in revolt against the Lord? Why do the rulers plot together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, “Let us break the yoke that connect us to the ways of God and to the ways of justice. Let us break the bonds that connect us to each other.”

We are living in a time of turmoil and change. The turmoil is all around us, in the rise of extremist political groups, in the increasing power of authoritarian leaders, in the changing climate, and in the fragmenting, bankruptcy and dissolution of our churches and other institutions. The turmoil is all around us.

The turmoil is also among us. The turmoil is in the harsh attacks, in the words of judgment that seek to silence, and in the splintering of our communities into tribal groups. The turmoil is between us and our friends and family members.

The turmoil is also within us. The turmoil is in our shelves of self-help books. The turmoil is in our fretting over our clothes, or our homes or our hair. The turmoil is in our constant striving to do better, look better and be better versions of ourselves. The turmoil is in our harsh judgment of ourselves. The turmoil is in our constant questioning of the value of our lives and work and in our questioning of the value of our relationships.

So I am here to tell you that your life and your work are valuable. You bring something to this world that is precious. Please, don’t change. Please, just be yourself. Just be.

This might be slightly different from the message you expected to hear this morning. After all, today is the day when, on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, we read this story of the Transfiguration. Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

This is the Sunday of the Transfiguration so it might seem strange for me to say, ‘don’t change’.

After all, the collect we have been given for today’s service includes this sentence: ‘Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory’. After all, the church is the place where we come in order to be saved, or strengthened or at least where we confess our sins. In a certain way, the church is an engine of change. The church is the place where I come because I know I must be changed, otherwise I will surely die. Perhaps I should say, the church is the place where I come because I know something in me must be changed by God’s love, otherwise the love in me will die.
Yet I will plead with you again; please, don’t change. Don’t let all of your efforts to do the right thing be overwhelmed by the pain or the chaos. Don’t let the passion for goodness that motivated you to get out of bed this morning be whittled away by the inhumanity of institutions and businesses. Don’t let your quest for truth and justice for yourself and others be weakened by the relentless stream of bad news of the past week. Don’t let the love God has place in the center of your life be shaken by the betrayal or loneliness or violence or hatred you may have experienced. Don’t let go of the goodness and love given to you by God. Never give up in your quest for truth and justice.

Don’t change, but move into the center of who you are and the person God created you to be. Don’t change; instead let more of yourself be revealed. Let more of your passion for goodness, truth and justice be revealed. Let more of the love you have protected through years of struggle and hardship be revealed. Let God play a part in the revelation.

This is what happened to Jesus and to Moses when they went up the mountain. This is a sort of transformation where the important parts of your life grow brighter and the less important parts fall away. This kind of new revelation of God’s love is called a transfiguration.

St. Paul’s has experienced a kind of transfiguration in recent years. Not all of changes at St. Paul’s in the past several decades fall into this category, but some of the new things at St. Paul’s can clearly be seen as a new revelation of God’s love. I don’t know everything about these changes because I have only been here four years, but people have described a sort of transfiguration they have seen at St. Paul’s. They have seen a sort of transformation where some of the important parts of St. Paul’s have grown brighter and some of the less important parts have fallen away.

This is easiest to see when we look at something that has takes place every week at St. Paul’s: Sunday morning fellowship. Twenty years ago Sunday morning coffee hour looked quite different from the way it looks today. Twenty years ago coffee hour was held in the Hansen Dining Room. People did not sit at tables; they stood in groups. Sometimes they stood by themselves, trying to figure out how to be part of a group. There were two options for refreshments at coffee hour in those days: coffee and donuts. If you didn’t drink coffee or eat donuts you were out of luck. I’ve been told that one person more or less ruled the kitchen at St. Paul’s back then. She made the coffee every Sunday and put the donuts on platters and cleaned up the dishes.

Today Sunday morning fellowship looks very different. Today Sunday morning fellowship is a shared ministry. The kitchen belongs to all of us, and most of us take a turn at some point in hosting the little party on Sunday mornings. In a certain sense it doesn’t really make sense to call it coffee hour today. We are often welcomed to tables spread with a range of foods and beverages: crackers and cheese, delicious baked goods, even vegetables, sandwiches and lunch foods I have never seen at a coffee hour before.

On the other hand, it makes sense to call it ‘coffee hour’ because people often do spend an hour talking with old friends or getting to know newer members. That’s partly because we don’t stand in amorphous groups, we sit at small tables. I hope no one ever feels left out of a group, and I think it’s less likely to happen as we sit at tables in the Brewster Room. I also hope it is a more comfortable place for introverts, since the conversations are often among just two or three people.

I would describe this gradual transition in our coffee hour as a transfiguration. Many of the same people are in the room, many of the conversations are about the same sorts of topics, but more of the love and power of God has been revealed. The important parts of St. Paul’s are shining brighter and the less important parts have fallen away. We are moving more into the center of what God intends for us.

Can you see a transfiguration happening in your own life? No matter your age or your position in life God is working in you. It is difficult for us to see how the transformation could happen. Sometimes we mostly feel like we are simply holding on for dear life, but God is seeking a new revelation of love in you and in me. So don’t let go of the love and goodness God has placed in the center of your life. Instead, let God’s gentle spirit peel away an old layer; let the love in you be revealed.