

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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“The Right Time”

Mark 1:14-20 (NRSV)

[14] Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, [15] and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

[16] As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. [17] And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." [18] And immediately they left their nets and followed him. [19] As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. [20] Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

A CALL TO SERVICE

This past Monday Carrollyn and I decided to celebrate the Martin Luther King holiday as President Obama suggested. We drove up to the Millennia Mall to give blood as an act of service to mark the holiday. The blood buses were all there in a circle at the far end of the parking lot. I thought, “This won’t take long. They have too many buses. They will never get that many people to give blood.”

I was wrong. All the buses were full, and Carrollyn and I had to wait outside for quite a while before we were able to give blood. At first I was miffed that I had to wait. But, then I reconsidered. Isn’t it wonderful that so many people answered the call to be of service to others?

When I was finally able to enter the bus I noticed other people who also answered the call to be of service in this way. I could see from the look in their eyes that they were a bit fearful. I soon learned why. They were giving blood for the first time ever.

While I was waiting for my wife to recover inside the bus I asked one of the supervisors outside, “Do you think today’s good response is due to the president’s call to service? With eyes all aglow the young woman gushed, “Oh yes. I’m sure of it. We’ve never had a response this good. Can you imagine what this country could do if we all began to pull together?”

With a pessimism born of too many dreams that died and too many politicians that lied I was tempted to say, “Don’t get you hopes up. Disciples can be very fickle. I know.”

But, I didn’t say that. I looked into her smiling face and said with a sense of wonder and awe, “Wow that would be something.”

I envied her enthusiasm and willingness to dream about the future. It reminded me of another young man I used to know some twenty five years ago. And I wondered, “What has happened to me? What would it take for me to dream again? What would it take for me to leave my hard won pessimism at home and risk everything, trusting in a person I barely knew?”

WHY DID THEY FOLLOW?

That's the question today's lesson from Scripture asks. Why were the disciples willing to leave so much behind and follow Jesus on the spur of the moment?

We have a hard time even imagining a story like this. Who in their right mind drops their nets and leaves their family behind to follow some itinerant preacher? Who is able to say, "Lord, you've asked me to change vocations and leave everything behind, and I'm going to do it!"

I wonder where we might go. I wonder how we might serve the Kingdom of God if we were to answer the call so quickly and completely.

I know. Simon, Andrew, James and John were special. They were apostles chosen by God. God may have chosen them to leave everything behind, but surely God doesn't do that today. God wouldn't want us to do something stupid and take up some kind of cross and follow him ... or would he?

IMMEDIATELY

One preacher told of leading a weekly Bible study that sounded a whole lot like the studies we have every Wednesday. They were based upon the lectionary passage that the pastor was going to use that week. But, once a year they did something different. They took time to read a gospel straight through in one evening.

She said that quite often we miss much of the meaning in the gospel because we study the stories in isolation from one another. We should think of them like episodes in a series with a common message.

Mark is an especially good example of this. If you read Mark's gospel out loud at one sitting there is a tremendous sense of urgency. One commentator said that Mark is like "an alarm clock persistently declaring the time and demanding some response."

Mark's favorite word is "immediately." You read it over and over again in this gospel. Mark wants people to wake up and smell the coffee. The kingdom of God is near. The time is fulfilled or as Peterson playfully translates, "Times up!"

When the Bible talks about time it's not the kind of time that we keep track of with watches and calendars. It's another kind of time. The Greek word is "Kairos" and it means the "opportune time, a special time, a time in which a collection of factors create an unusually significant moment."

You know about that kind of time. It was the day you said, "I do" and your life changed forever. It was the day the nurse handed you that baby and called you "mamma" or "papa." Time stood still. That's Kairos time.

Jesus' disciples knew all about Kairos time. They were steeped in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament.

They knew by heart the prophecies about that great and terrible Day of the Lord when God's Kingdom would replace the kingdoms of this world. John the Baptist came preaching, "Times up. The Messiah is coming." And then when they arrested John Jesus began preaching, "Times up. The Kingdom has come near. It's time to repent and believe."

A MIRACLE STORY

When we hear this story we are amazed and perhaps disturbed that the disciples would give up so much on such short notice. But, Barbara Brown Taylor rightly notes that when we linger on such questions we are really emphasizing the wrong point.

She sees this story as a miracle story. It is about the power of God to walk up to a group of fishermen and create faith where there was no faith. It is about the power of God to take ordinary, run of the mill people and transform them into disciples who are willing to drop everything and follow Jesus.

When President Obama chose people for his cabinet he looked for the best and the brightest. It just made good sense. He needed the best people in order to get the work of the country done.

But, according to the Apostle Paul, God used a different technique when he chose people to do the work of his kingdom. God chose the foolish people, people who had a bad reputation and people who didn't have two nickels to rub together.

Why did God do such a thing? He did it so that everyone would know that this kingdom was dependent upon God's choice and power and not upon us. (1 Corinthians 1:18-31)

As Taylor put it we need to remember that "God has the power to recruit people who have made terrible choices; to invade the most hapless lives and fill them with light; to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and smack them upside the head with glory."

We Presbyterians don't like to be smacked up the side of the head with glory. We believe in doing everything decently and in order. We form committees. We prepare reports and study the issue for at least six months to a year.

Sometimes that's a good thing. But, sometimes that's not so good. Sometimes a decision needs to be made on something other than an exhaustive study and a mound of facts. That was the case when Jesus called those first disciples. They were overwhelmed by glory. To use Mark's favorite word, immediately they had a new job, a new life and a new set of priorities.

It doesn't always happen this way, but sometimes the humdrum of everyday life, our time is interrupted by God's time, Kairos. God disturbs our happy little life and presents us with a radical choice, "Follow me and not the ways of the world."

BECKET

There's a very moving scene near the end of the play, Becket. The king had appointed Becket, his old hunting companion and drinking buddy as Archbishop. The king, of course, expected Becket to cooperate with his scheme to bring the church under royal control.

But, the king didn't realize that Becket view his ordination as a genuine call, a summons to "serve the honor of God." So Becket refused to cooperate with the king's plan. The king in his astonishment reminded Becket of their wild days together at the hunts and in the brothels. He told Becket that his new stance of resistance "just wasn't like him."

Becket replied, "Perhaps, I am no longer like myself."

When the king pressed for an explanation, Beckett described his sense of call. He had this feeling that an ultimate claim had been placed on his life at the time of his ordination. He said,

"I felt for the first time that I had been entrusted with something there in that empty cathedral. When you ordered me to take up this burden I was a man without honor and suddenly and found it, the honor of God."

Becket's ordinary world of hunting and parties was interrupted by the call of God. His time gave way to God's time, Kairos.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Following Jesus and not the world will always cause trouble. Jesus told those first disciples to follow him, and they did. They left their nets, their jobs. They left their family.

We know that even Jesus' own family thought that they were crazy. They were working long hours. They weren't eating right.

So Mary and some of Jesus' brothers come to take him home and "knock some sense into him." But, Jesus wouldn't go. His call like the call of the disciples had changed things forever. He was about creating a new family and a new world. And that job took precedence over all other jobs. (Mark 3:21-35)

Later on in the gospel story the going gets rough and some disciples turn back. And these first disciples reflect upon all that they have left to follow Jesus. They say perhaps with a bit of fear and uncertainty, "We have left everything to follow you. Our 401 K is empty. Where are we going to go? What are we going to do?" (Matthew 19:27; Mark 10:28)

And Jesus promised his disciples a new life. That new life would be filled with a new family and friends and a job to do. But, it would also be filled with persecution. Agreeing to follow Jesus always comes with a price.

Jim Wallis points out that "the great tragedy of modern evangelism is in calling many to belief but few to obedience."

I think this is true. There is a price to be paid for those who dare to follow Jesus. It is the cost of obedience. It is the cost of going where he leads, and that means a willingness to leave other things behind.

This past week we celebrated the life and ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. King knew about sacrifice, and he knew about being called to a task that seemed too big. He had many

weaknesses and reservations about leading anything. But, I believe and many others believe that he was God's man for that time and place.

He was able to challenge the powers that be because he worked for a higher Lord and a greater kingdom. He said, "Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter—but beautiful struggle—for a new world. This is the calling of the [children] of God, and our brothers [and sisters] wait eagerly for our response."

His power to lead was always informed by his Christian discipleship. And the same should be true of us.

THE KINGDOM IS NEAR

Jesus said that the kingdom of God has come near. And I believe that statement is as true today as it was 2,000 years ago. Despite all appearances to the contrary, the kingdom of God is near us here and now. The coming of Jesus ushered in the kingdom and let loose a Spirit, a Holy Spirit that changed everything. God's kingdom is present with us in the most unlikely places and situations.

And the power of God's kingdom is the power of repentance. That's how his preaching is characterized in our lesson for today.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is near. Therefore, repent and believe the good news." If the kingdom of God is as near to us today as it was 2,000 years ago, then it seems to me that we too face this need to repent. Peterson translates this passage, "Change your life and believe the Message."

In the Bible repentance is not just being sorry for past sins. It is a determination to go in a different direction, to change your mind and your life in response to that kingdom that comes near.

Following Jesus is not a spectator sport. It is a declaration of trust. It is going in a new direction.

For some, like the rich young ruler who owned a lot of stuff this was not such good news. Though he wanted to do God's will, he wanted his stuff more ... even though his stuff in the end made him very sad. (Mark 10:17-27)

But, for those who are willing to leave anything and go anywhere it is still good news, the best news ever.

MORE THAN LEFTOVERS

A minister told about some pelicans in northern California. Pelicans are naturally great at getting fish. But, these particular pelicans were hanging out near a fleet of fishing boats. The fishermen would pull into the little harbor and clean their fish right on the spot, throwing the heads and rest right into the water.

Well, for the pelicans this was good eating. And they began eating the leftovers instead of going out and fishing. They just sat by the harbor and waited for the fishing boats to come in.

Things changed.

The fisherman found out that they could sell the fish waste so they stopped throwing it into the water.

But, the pelicans didn't change. They just sat by the water and waited for the fishing boats to come in and give them a free meal.

All the while the pelicans were growing thinner and thinner.

Eventually the wildlife officials came in to check out this situation. And they came up with a plan. They brought in pelicans from another area to join this flock and teach the starving birds how to fish again.

From time to time we in the church act like those pelicans.

We forget that Jesus calls disciples to fish for men and women. Jesus calls disciples to preach the good news and make the kingdom a reality for those who haven't heard.

And when we forget that, we find out that spiritual leftovers do not last forever. We begin to spiritually starve.

In some cases our life even comes apart at the seams.

STICKY FINGERS ON THE WHEEL

Pastor Julie Pennington tells a story about a man in his late sixties. She described him as rugged, burly and brilliant. He looked a bit like the Marlborough Man. He studied at a prestigious college in the East and then moved to Texas to work on his doctorate.

Somewhere along the way he became addicted to cocaine. He just tumbled into a dark hole. He lost his family. He lost his place in graduate school. He lost big pieces of himself.

But, she said, "Somehow he washed up on the shores of a good church. And when he did, he was so fragile—he looked like he'd been rode hard and put up wet—as the say in Texas. But, the folks in that church put their arms around that man and slowly he started to heal, and eventually, miraculously, even reunited with his wife and children."

The man and his family came over to the pastor's house for dinner, and the talk turned to faith. The man said, "I want to believe that my best days aren't behind me, that I can still make a difference for God." But, then he put his head in his hands and said, "I just can't help but think that I've blown all my best chances."

Then his wife reached over, took his hand and said, "Baby you've got to take your sticky fingers off the steering wheel. If God could yank Jesus out of a grave, I figure he can make something beautiful out of busted parts."

Every day you and I have to make the choice. We can try and keep our sticky fingers on the steering wheel or we can trust God to lead us.

Jesus still calls disciples to come and follow. If we say okay we can't predict where he might lead us. We will often be afraid and uncertain.

But, Jesus will be leading us. He will be leading us out of our hunger and pain. And he will be leading us to preach a word of hope and salvation where it is needed most.

What about you? What is Jesus calling you to do? What is Jesus calling you to say? Times up. The kingdom is near. The kingdom is coming to you this very day. Jesus tells us, "Come. Follow me."

Amen.