

Richmond Hill
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3 Epiphany
Matthew 4:12-23
The Call of the Disciples
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Repent. Follow. Fish.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles--the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. (*Matthew 4:12-23*)

What does it mean that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand?

What are we invited to do?

Repent.
Follow.
Fish.

The hardest thing in Christianity is to distinguish between the invitation of Jesus and the ecclesiastization of that invitation. And yet, as we follow Jesus' teaching, it is the most important thing for us. For the invitation of Jesus is good news to the city. The ecclesiastization of it is a strange, self-perpetuating institutional charter which stops short of his goal and sometimes prevents it altogether.

Tonight we're going to look at Jesus' invitation, as presented at the story of the beginning of his ministry in Matthew's Gospel. We'll contrast the easy ecclesiastical understanding with the more basic – and perhaps more difficult – life-understanding. You can listen, and think, and choose.

What does Jesus invite us to do here at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel?
Repent. Follow. Fish.

1. Repent.

Before we look at the word “repent” again, let's note that here, as earlier in Matthew's Gospel, it's attached to a second phrase: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” or “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.” The implication of the language is that the proximity of the kingdom of heaven is related either to repentance.

You all know the classic meaning of the word “repentance.” It is related to one's sins, one's misdeeds, one's using and mistreating of other people, one's collaboration in injustice, one's regular and habitual pursuit of ways of death rather than life.

And of course, what I want to say to that is, “Yeah! Right on! The kingdom's proximity makes the reason for that kind of repentance all the more important! But while we're there, let's just look at that repentance a little deeper. We can get stuck there. And that kind of repentance, no matter how thoroughgoing, is only a little bit of the problem.

In 1549, the Church of England published the Book of Common Prayer, translating the liturgical texts of the church into English and adding some new prayers. The Book included a General Confession, on the premise that persons might not be making private confession before each mass. Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer wrote a prayer of confession for that book which has been widely used in the English speaking world ever since. In that prayer is this phrase: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us.”

Cranmer, in this phrase, created unlimited responsibility. It is one thing to confess those things we have done that are wrong. One hopes that there might be a list one could write, no matter how excruciating. But to confess those things one has not done? The list is endless. There is no way to finish the list until we are exhausted. No wonder he closed the paragraph by saying “there is no health in us.”

To repent, Cranmer said, is not only to list the offenses one may have committed. It is to recognize that forgiving these lists will not heal either us or the world. The work of the kingdom is far more pervasive. It includes things that are not on our agendas – corporate and collective things, things we don't see or choose to ignore. It includes blindness, intentional and unintentional: We have not done those things we ought to have done.”

Cranmer was obsessed by guilt. He was in that way a true citizen of the guilt-ridden 16th Century, but he was also no doubt reflecting the ambiguities, compromises,

and outrageous behaviors of the King who had appointed him and named himself head of the Church of England, and divorced or beheaded several wives.

Cranmer's guilt is not what Jesus' Good news invites. But his comprehensiveness is what Jesus invites: To repent in Jesus' teaching means to look again at everything, not just one's misdeeds. It means to see the world as God's Kingdom in process; to pray as if the world were God's kingdom coming into being; and to find cues for living that are related to that larger agenda – not just feeling sorry for the bad things one has done, but seeking to know what one has not known, to learn what one has not learned, and to be involved with this comprehensive divine enterprise called the coming of the Kingdom. To repent means to change one's way of looking at the world; to let one's heart be changed so that one can see.

What does Jesus invite us to do here at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel?
Repent. Follow. Fish.

2. Follow.

Every Sunday School graduate knows what comes next – even if he doesn't know what Jesus said about repentance.

Jesus went by some folks who were tending their nets, being fishermen at the Sea of Galilee, and he told them to follow him. They did.

It's a simple instruction. But we don't really pay attention to the instruction. Here, the misunderstanding of the phrase "repentance" really begins to cost us. To follow him, of course, means to live right instead of being those old sinful folk. But in the context of this invitation, that is a secondary meaning. To follow him means to see the portion of the society you have not seen, and to see it through his eyes. He invited his disciples on a mission trip, -- but it was not primarily a mission trip to distant lands. Even simple fishermen might have been to many of the places they went, and to Jerusalem.

No, following Jesus meant meeting some people in the society you had only heard of, but not met. It meant being with different classes and races and paying attention to them, not just ignoring them and keeping up with your own conversation. It meant paying attention to the troubles of people, and the trouble people caused one another. It meant learning to analyse hypocrisy and injustice, and in doing that, to find that the seeds of the hypocrisy were in oneself.

Jesus invited these fishermen to follow, to see, and to learn. He articulated the agenda at another point in Matthew's Gospel: "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice." The difference between mercy and sacrifice is the same as the difference between things undone and things done. Sacrifice – offerings to God in the temple – is limited, prescribed, contained. Mercy is unlimited, always needed, a totally different way of living and viewing the world.

Of course, you have to believe in the forgiveness of God to be willing to get into this unlimited territory, because if you are going to blame yourself for everything you

see, you won't be able to see much. That's where prayer has to come in. If you want to see the world clearly, you have to be able to pray about it – to give it to God, so that you can keep on learning, keep on seeing, have a different, repentant, new Kingdom-oriented view of the world.

This mission trip wasn't to foreign lands. It was into the land they lived in, deep into the land they lived in, and in the process, it was deep into themselves. Eventually it led each into a knowledge of his or her own potential and his or her own vocational life. It was the journey of repentance – not a journey of feeling bad, but a journey of seeing rightly, of seeing anew.

What does Jesus invite us to do here at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel?
Repent. Follow. Fish.

3. Fish.

Come after me, and I will make you fish for people.

So what does this mean? Does this mean getting people to join as disciples? Or does it mean healing and working for the coming of the kingdom and engaging with others in those activities?

If we look at the repentance and the following, I think we can see that the answer is both – but there is a priority. The first priority is being good news – that is, it is the work of the kingdom, of justice and healing and helping people eat and work and find themselves and get educated and get healthy. And in the process, there is the gathering of new workers and disciples. Only by pursuing the one kind of fish do the others come in.

A fisherman really knows this. Have you ever seen people fish with nets? You get everything in the net. And every once in awhile you get a really beautiful fish that is one that you really remember.

Fishing is about moving into the unknown. All you can see is the water. You are working with things that cannot be seen. You have spent time repenting – learning to see things a different way, acknowledging that there is this whole area you have neither seen nor known. You have begun a journey out into the deep, going to places in your own society and culture that you have never gone, being taught by the spirit of mercy rather than demanding that others sacrifice themselves to your model.

And now you are fishing, learning, waiting for a tug on the line of your heart, seeking to find yourself related to a net of possibility and meaning which has not been there before, going down into the depths of your own life and other people's lives and helping things come into being and come to the light that have never been there before.

This is the unlimited nature of the kingdom. This is the healing and discovering power of God. This is the transforming, reconciling power of the Holy Spirit. Repent. Follow. Fish. The Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near. There is far more right here in this Sea of Metropolitan Richmond than anyone dares to imagine. The opportunities are before us in prayer and in reality.

AMEN.