

Year A, 3rd Sunday After the Epiphany

January 22nd, 2017

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Matthew 4:12-23

Caught in the Net of Love

The arrest of John the Baptist impacted Jesus. When word of it came, Jesus left Nazareth, up in the hills, and moved to Capernaum, a very prosperous crossroads town on the shores of The Sea of Galilee. Geographically, it is quite a dramatic shift. He moves from a poverty-stricken village a long way from nowhere to a robust, multi-ethnic fishing and travel center on the coast of the big lake.

Some versions say “Jesus withdrew to Galilee,” a more vivid rendering than “he went to Galilee” that we just read. The New Interpreter’s Commentary believes that “withdrew” is a better translation because it captures Jesus’ response to threats. Jesus doesn’t aggressively react to ominous news with loud proclamations or dire predictions. No, he withdraws to another place; he takes decisive action but this action is initially inward and always non-violent. With this move he lays a foundation for what he intends to do next.

Now let’s bring this into dialogue with where we are in our history. We don’t know what the inauguration on Friday means for us. Some of us are hopeful and some of us are fearful. We all suspect it’s significant. If we follow Jesus’ example in responding to extraordinary news, of which there has been plenty of late, we quietly withdraw, set our foundations in a new place and prepare to be a light in our land of deep darkness, no matter if we view that darkness from the left or the right. Matthew brings in a hopeful note by quoting Isaiah who said “The people who lived in the dark have seen a great light, and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death.”

We at Clarkes Church have seen this light and it wasn’t Obama and it won’t be President Trump. Another light has appeared for us and it illumines the darkness of our world and gives us hope. This hope is for the whole world and precedes all religion. Matthew is clear that Jesus’ ministry begins in Galilee of the Gentiles where there are Jews but Gentiles are in the majority. These gentiles are the people who see the great light.

Like the wise men coming from the east who symbolize the presence of the whole world at his birth, Jesus moves to Capernaum in Galilee of the Gentiles to begin his work. This thing Jesus is doing is not just for us, it’s for us all. His ministry will not be about divide and control. It will begin with the proclamation of the kingdom of God that removes division and asks its participants to do what’s best for the other; particularly the poor, the sick, the stranger and those in prison. Jesus is announcing the arrival of a new kingdom that from now on will rule the earth whether the earth recognizes it or not. A new era has begun.

“From that time Jesus began to announce, ‘Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!’” This is Jesus’ response to the tragic news of the imprisonment of John who had been the peoples hope. “Change your hearts and lives” is something people can do in

their helplessness, rage, fear, frustration and bewilderment. Don't focus on CNN and what they describe. Focus on what you need to do to "change your hearts and lives." This is the time for introspection and action. Why now; because "here comes the kingdom of heaven!" Jesus is opening up an alternative that in the end will prevail and asks us to live it now. Plus, things that jolt us now can be opportunities to begin anew. They get us out of our habitual ruts and make it possible to forge new trails.

Remember, the kingdom of Heaven is not something you wait for, die to attain, reserved only for the sweet by and by. No, the Kingdom of Heaven is that experience which comes to us from outside our rivalrous world and is available to us when we respond to God's gentle call. It's where we let go of defining ourselves over against the other; convincing ourselves that we are more worthy than our neighbor who is different from us or perhaps less worthy. The Kingdom of Heaven knows we are all children of God and God loves us all.

I want to share a personal story that I hope shows the kingdom working. I went to have my hair cut this week carrying one of my complex books, this one describing how western culture can only be understood as a perversion of Christianity. I don't know that I will get anything out of this book as it is above my intellectual pay scale but I wanted to give it a try. My barber was a petite, very pretty young woman who asked me what I was reading. "Oh," I said, "it's a very deep book that I am hoping will help me understand our crazy world." She said, "I love to read too. I like to read deep books that make me think differently about things. What kind of things do you read," she asked? Again, I wondered what to say. I didn't want to pull intellectual rank on her and make her feel dumb. I guess the spirit must have been at work in me. I said "I read a lot about racism and white privilege. It's hard to see it in ourselves but I am hoping to get better at seeing the world through the eyes of the other person." "I know," she said, "my family adopted a five year old girl who was three quarters African American. In little ways people treat her differently than the rest of us. She has a 3.5 grade point average and has applied to eight universities and been turned down by all eight. My other sister has a lower grade point average and was accepted by the first one."

I was impressed with her openness and curiosity. "Are you going to college," I asked, revealing my prejudice. "No," she said, "I just finished hair dressing school. If I went to college I would just end up with a lot of debt and I don't know what I would study any way." "Ah," I said, "so you are developing a trade." "Yes," she said. I felt good about that for her. She had found a way to serve people and make a living and so had I. We were different but both serving and that was fine.

"Do you go to church," she asked. "Yes," I said, "I am a United Methodist. Do you go to church?" "Yes," she replied. "I go to New Hope Community Church." I told her about Teri Gant whose funeral was happening later that day at New Hope Community Church. (She was the founder and director of our local homeless shelter.) She had heard of her. I never told her I was a pastor. I was afraid she would be intimidated and no longer speak to me as an equal. I was finding the conversation very satisfying. I think it was grounded in the Kingdom of Heaven because we were being real with each other. It happened while both of us were still living; she, 22 and a hair dresser; me, 70, with a doctorate in practical theology.

“As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ he said, ‘and I’ll show you how to fish for people.’”

How do we fish for people? Could it be fishing for people is being real with them. Not claiming higher ground and being willing to expose the fact of our shared humanness with the other no matter who they are. We all want to be caught in the net of love and that can only happen when we see the other as human just like us. That’s why I love it when people who are very different from us show up in our little church. Shared humanness is really the way of the kingdom. Those who see themselves as living in Jesus’ Kingdom work to find unity and points of connection. They even work to find it with their enemies.

“Come, follow me,’ he said....Right away, they left their nets and followed him.” Amen.