

You want me to do what?!

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I think that many of us would agree, Jesus would have been a powerful personality to encounter as he proclaims, delivering messages like: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

Bible scholar Marcus Borg loved talking about Jesus. I remember hearing him speak to an issue that became controversial in the United Church of Canada in the 1990s. A past United Church of Canada Moderator was ambushed by the Ottawa Citizen, asked if he believes in the physical resurrection of Jesus. The Very Reverend Bill Phipps balked at the question, saying, in essence:

Did he rise, literally, up into the clouds? No. Modern science tells us that there are clouds up there, not heavens.

Phipps went on to say that he did, in fact, believe in Jesus' resurrection, but that he believed in a metaphorical resurrection.

Borg's approach to this same loaded question is compelling. When he was asked what he believed about resurrection at a lecture he said, and I paraphrase here: *I don't know what historically happened that Easter morning, but I do know that the proclamation "He is Risen" ignited a movement so powerful that it has transformed lives for over 2 thousand years.*

Imagine the experience of those first disciples, invited to drop their nets and follow Jesus!

Calling people to *Repent*, interesting word. Rolf Jacobson muses about how preachers like myself attach morality to repentance, like, "Change your behaviour" or "Turn away from sin." But the Greek word often translated as "repent", Jacobson says, might be more accurately understood as, "Change your way of thinking!" or most simply, "Wrap your mind around this!"

Jacobson continues:

God's revealed good news, the news that in the cross of Christ's the unexpected reality of God's gracious love has broken into [our] fallen world (that is, that "the kingdom of God has drawn near").¹

Jesus was offering to those first century peasants an invitation: to look at their lives differently than they did previously. A new reality as God might see it. You know, those observations about injustice in the world that people witness, then muse with resignation, "that's just the way it is". Maybe things aren't that simple.

There were gender boundaries that ancient culture took as a given, but Jesus broke them repeatedly. There were defined class systems, but Jesus seemed to disregard them. Bully regimes in control, yet, though Jesus didn't hold up a placard, he often reminded people that God was greater than Caesar, and that God's kin-dom vision was

¹ Rolf Jacobson. "A Beautiful Community", January 19, 2020 at workingpreacher.org

coming, soon! The Gospel writers several times indicate how teachings and reputation of Jesus instilled fear in the minds of Roman leaders.

Economic hardship, tyrants in control, religious leaders seemingly coopted within the political system; do any of those sound familiar?

How do we cope with the trials and tribulations of life? **How do you** integrate your faith into your life when you are regularly faced with cynicism, injustice, and fear that builds walls in our world? I know that many of you would tell me the things you do. Some of you connect over tea with people you love. Others enjoy the discipline of yoga. Others of you walk outdoors in order connect with Creation. All great practices that get us through.

I'm thinking of the scholar's translation of Jesus' teaching to "repent" as wrapping your mind around a completely new way of thinking, and I wonder if we are called to an even deeper, more immersive, opportunity when Jesus calls us to follow.

In Barbara Brown-Taylor's book *An Altar in the World* a clergy friend asked her one day, "What is saving your life today?" It was a jarring question. That question pushed her to look deeper at the everyday, even mundane routines of life, and to find spiritual meaning in them. Brown-Taylor sums it up this way,

What is saving my life now is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth. My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them...What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world.²

As I think about Matthew's story of the calling of the disciples, I'm thinking that Jesus called them cherish every moment, every person, every encounter – finding the holy in all things. Being present in the world. Paying attention in ordinary moments. Caring about stuff even when, *especially* when, others don't seem to care.

Training to be a clergy, you spend a great deal of time focused on the call to ministry, a particular ministry. Our church can tend to fixate on that specific "call", distracting us from the many calls to ministry in our church. Let us all remember the people Jesus invited to follow him. They were not religious elite, or particularly well educated. These Bible stories of call celebrated ordinary people. Christ's call, ancient and modern, is to all to see God's radical reality in the midst of ordinary living.

Let me say that I regularly see in the course of a typical week people who have answered the call of Christ to follow. from the generous spirited volunteers who greeted you, and set coffee and treats before and after worship. Many people who *could* choose not to serve, to lead, to care. Read the St. Andrew's *Annual Report* and you will see a litany of reports listing names of only a few of the many followers of Jesus who answer the call.

² Barbara Brown-Taylor, *An Altar in the Word: A Geography of Faith*. © 2009 HarperOne.

I reflected on what a modern twist on Matthew's Gospel story of Jesus calling James and John might be, a real-to-life possibility in this busy and self-absorbed world we live in. I imagined the encounter this way:

Jesus sayeth to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

The modern John might have replied, "Uh, you want us to do what?" Awkwardly he might say to James, "Hmmm, I think we have an important thing today, don't we James?"

"Yeah, right." James muses, feeling a pang of guilt. "Jesus. Is that your name? Maybe you can come back next week?"

And modern dad, Zebedee, of course he is teaching his boys responsibility. Ancient or modern he would not be pleased with this distraction Jesus presents. Helicopter parents today would present a significant hurdle to Jesus calling children of this day.

Pastor Roger Nishioka, reflecting on God's modern call, shared his memory of his childhood watching the everyday drama of life of an elephant seal mother and pup on Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. In this episode, the mother fed the pup, but then needed to feed, and so headed mom headed out into the water to regain her energy. Replenished, the mother returned to shore, but not to the pup, instead, to a different part of the beach. Mother seal then calls out, and listens for the pup's call amidst the din of other calls of adults and pups. Contrary, perhaps, to our intuition, that pup and mother find one another by following one another's call and scent.

Nishioka's dad, a Presbyterian pastor, turned to him and said,

You know, that's how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other.³

The call of Jesus can be to every one of us. The call of God to any and every child of God. We only hear the grand stories of Call. The most meaningful stories, though, I suggest to you, are of the calls in your ordinary day to pay attention, to care, to find spiritual treasure in everyday life, and then your living gratefully in response. Amen.

³ Rodger Y. Nishioka. Pastoral Reflection on Matthew 4: 12-23. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* - Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.