

THE GOOD STUFF
Matthew 4:12-23
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 26, 2014

A man, after being introduced to Christ, became really excited about his new found faith. He read his Bible every day and went to church every Sunday. But there was a disconnect between the two. When he read the gospels he found exciting stories about miraculous healings and transformed lives while the worship services at the church he attended were boring and predictable. So, one Sunday he asked an elder, “When do we get to the good stuff?” “What do you mean good stuff?” “You know the good stuff: multiplying loaves and fishes, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising the dead, that stuff.”

The elder looked at him as if he were from Mars and said, “We don’t do that in this church.”

Every Sunday for the last six years the benediction or the final “good word” every Sunday is from The Message, Gene Peterson’s translation of the Bible from Matthew 10, Jesus’ instructions to his disciples just before he sent them out two by two on their first mission trip. By now you may know it by heart.

“Go to the lost, confused people right here in your neighborhood. Tell them the Kingdom of God is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out demons... And don’t worry about what you’ll say or how you’ll say it. The right words will be there: the Spirit of your Father will supply the words.”

I started using this benediction that sends you back out into the world because this is the good stuff good churches do, being Christ’s hands and feet and eyes and ears as we continue the good stuff Jesus started 2,000 years ago.

“Keep doing the good stuff.” Sounds like a great vision statement. Continue the ministry Jesus started and then passed on to his apostles and disciples and they, in turn, passed down to us.

You might be thinking, “Sounds great. I agree this is what the Church should be doing.” To which I must respond, “OK, but what do you mean by “the church,” do you mean the institution, the organization, or do you mean “you and me,” because after all “we” are the Church.

This is where the Gospel gets personal and by “personal” I don’t mean “private” but I mean this: Christ challenges you and me and says, “I called you to discipleship so what are you going to do about it?”

Bono, the lead singer of U2 was once invited to speak at the National Prayer Breakfast.

He said, “A number of years ago I met a wise man who changed my life. In countless ways, large and small, I was always seeking the Lord’s blessing. I was saying, “I have a new song, look after it. I have a family, please look after them. And this wise man said, “Stop. Stop asking God to bless what you’re doing. Instead get involved in what God is doing, because it’s already blessed.”

One of the things I learned a long time ago is all good things come from God. God, not you and me, makes things happen. If there’s a healing, God did it, if a broken relationship is restored, God did the reconciling, if a sermon speaks to you, God supplied the words and gave you the insight. God, not us, is responsible for making good things happen. And here’s the good news, God invites you to participate, to become instruments of his peace, to bring health to the sick, raise the dead, touch the untouchables, feed the hungry and kick out demons. Doing these things is doing discipleship.

Unfortunately it’s easy to confuse discipleship with church membership. Membership means you pay your dues, attend meetings and choose whether or not to participate in activities. Discipleship, on the other hand, goes way beyond membership. Membership is a noun, it’s static and predictable. Discipleship is a verb, unpredictable and action packed. Membership is safe and easy, discipleship can be dangerous and difficult. Members like the status quo, but disciples resist the urge to keep things the same and are willing to follow Jesus wherever he takes us, even when we don’t want to go there.

In this morning’s gospel lesson we read about Jesus’ decision to leave Nazareth and live in the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali, or Galilee, which the prophet Isaiah described as being a place of darkness. Why a place of darkness? Because Galilee wasn’t the Bible belt, it was more secular and less religious than the rest of Israel. Yes, there were synagogues but the faith communities were small and dwindling and even those who attended synagogue were somewhat lax in their religious activities.

So Jesus began his ministry and called his first disciples in a place where church attendance and religious practice was low. And his first disciples weren’t “religious” men, not one priest, Pharisee or scribe among them. Instead, he called fishermen. “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men and women.”

Nowadays especially non religious people wince when they hear that phrase “fishers of men” because it implies we Christians are out to snare them, scoop them up, drag them into our churches then brainwash them into submission. Unfortunately in the past just that happened. Renegade missionaries forced their brand of religion on people or else!

But that won't happen again if we listen carefully to Jesus' first sermon briefly summed up in the sentence, "Repent, the Kingdom of heaven has come near,"

Usually when you hear the word "repent" you automatically think of your sins, your bad habits and your negative attitudes. "Jesus wants me to clean up my act and live right." But the word "repent" covers more than your sins and shortcomings. Repent also means a reversal of your perceptions, looking at the world in a radically different way, so you can see what God sees when you look at yourself, your neighbor and how things get done in our self-made, broken world system.

So repentance isn't just being sorry, repentance means changing direction and becoming involved in what God is already doing through his Church, as together we bring health to the sick, feed the hungry, raise the dead, touch the untouchables and kick out demons.

Again, listen to what that wise man said to Bono. "Don't ask God to bless what you are doing, get involved in what God is already doing.

Remember what it was like when you were in high school? The weekend was coming up and a friend called and said, "**Do you want to go to the movies with me Friday night?**" You didn't want to commit because you heard so and so might have a party on Friday night, so you say no because you hope something better will come along.

We still do this as we get older in all aspects of our lives, even in our discipleship. We get overwhelmed by our busy schedules, our jobs, our social calendars, kid's sports, so what's the first thing to get bumped, the things that have to do with your spiritual growth, or as some might call it your "**faithful discipleship.**"

A pastor was asked to define the term "**faithful disciple.**" He replied, "**We can begin by applying the same standards of commitment to Christ we do in other areas of our life. Is that too much to ask of ourselves? Consider this: If your car stopped three times, would you consider it dependable? If your paper boy skipped your house Mondays and Thursdays, would he be considered dependable? If you didn't show up for work three times a month, would your boss call you dependable? If your computer quit a day every now and then, would you say, 'Oh well, it works most of the time.'** If you miss a couple of car or mortgage payments, do you get away with saying, 'Oh well, ten out of twelve isn't too bad?'"

Don't you see, you and I hold others to a higher standard usually because your job and your quality of life and well being of your family depends on those high standards. And yet when it comes to your spiritual and emotional health, too often, more important "**things**" get all the attention.

"I'm too busy to pray. I don't have time for Bible study. I don't have time to give my time to bring health to the sick, raise the dead, touch the untouchables and kick out demons." Yes, the temptation is always there to let your personal commitment to God and your neighbor slide whenever you feel your back is against the wall and something has to give or I'll explode, so it might as well be my commitment to Christ because after all who'll miss me if I don't show up?

The church choir director was going nuts. There was an important choral concert coming up fast but at every rehearsal several members of the choir were always absent. Finally, at the last rehearsal just before the concert the choir director announced, **"I want to personally thank our pianist for being the only member of the entire choir to attend each and every rehearsal for the last two months."**

At this point the pianist stood and said, **"Gee, it's the least I could do since I can't be at the concert tonight."**

Most of you have seen or at least know about the movie *The Bridge over the River Kwai* which told the story of British soldiers held in a Japanese Prison Camp during World War II.

The Scottish regiments had a system. The soldiers were paired up for the purpose of looking out for each other. It was each soldier's responsibility to put his comrade's welfare over his own.

One soldier named Angus took his commitment seriously. While in the prison camp when his friend was very sick, he nursed him back to health. When rations were low Angus gave his food. Someone stole the other soldier's blanket, Angus gave him his own.

The soldier Angus nursed back to health fully recovered but Angus weakened by his sacrifice of himself, became sick and died.

The other prisoners in the camp heard about Angus and they began sharing their food and supplies and looked after each other.

May that same spirit of commitment and dependability touch all of us so we, like Peter, James and John will immediately leave out nets behind when Christ calls, "Follow me."