

Disciples of a Deeper Reality

Matt: 4: 12, 17-22

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee...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.

Organize the order of events in your mind. Jesus comes off an exhausting forty-day excursion in the wilderness. He asks people what he missed while he was away. They tell him, "John has been arrested." "For what?" Jesus asks. "For his message," they say. So what is the next thing Jesus does? He picks up the baton and begins preaching the same message: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!" As John fades to the background, Jesus becomes the main teacher for God's kingdom. Next step: he does what all teachers do: he goes out to find himself some students.

Start by noticing: Jesus' first lesson is so show us that the Kingdom is where? [Answer: here] The kingdom is when? [Answer: now] Like all good teachers, he points to a deeper reality. He comes saying we need to "repent" which literally means to get a new perspective and to change the way think about things so we can see God's kingdom hidden in plain sight. It's like how advertising agencies hide symbols within their symbols. Look at a FedEx symbol and see an arrow going forward between the "E" and the "X." Amazon's logo has an arrow that points from A to Z. Even our PCUSA symbol has different symbols baked into them.

Once we see it, we can't unsee it.

Same holds true for God's kingdom. God's kingdom infused into our jobs, our neighborhoods, our ordinary to-do lists. Once we see it, we can't unsee it. Jesus' first lesson is to show us that the Kingdom of God is where? The kingdom is when?

Well what do the disciples do? They drop their nets. They join the cause. At first glance, Jesus's choices are...interesting. While most classrooms have only one Homer Simpson, or Michael Scott, or George Costanza to deal with, Jesus seems to have chosen twelve of them. Look at his list and it's a group consisting of blue-collar fishermen and political zealots, IRS agents and intellectual skeptics. Not to mention, the team doesn't have any women, which means it's doomed from the beginning. Keep reading and the group functions less like a dream team and more like the Bad News Bears. You would think as the story moves forward things would become clearer for them, but it doesn't. Following Jesus gets more complicated. Answers

become less obvious. The question anyone reading this story wonders is, “How in the world is this group going to help Jesus spread the news about the Kingdom of God?”

But perhaps that is exactly the point! The disciples are normal, ordinary people, like you and me, who don’t always understand what Jesus is doing, but are willing to drop their nets to follow him anyways. And just to be clear: while it seems as if they are leaving their jobs and families, it isn’t the case at all. Rather what they are leaving behind is their attachment to these things. Because following Jesus means that our lives no longer orbit around our income brackets, or family connections, or political parties. Instead our lives revolve around God’s kingdom values.

Which leads me to a deeper and far more troubling question: is it possible to be a Christian while not following Jesus? More, is it possible to follow Jesus without campaigning for kingdom policies? I hear a lot of Jesus language these days. I hear a lot of prayers in Jesus’s name. I hear our president’s main spiritual advisor saying that our president is God’s elected one, and if we aren’t supporting him we are working against God. But what if these policies do great damage to the poor and create more nets of oppression? What if this agenda emboldens sexism, racism, and bullying? What if these policies do not represent or reflect God’s values at all? The late-night talk show host and devout Catholic, Stephen Colbert put it best: “If this is going to be a Christian nation...either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we’ve got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don’t want to do it.”

I am afraid we are in a time where following Jesus has succumbed to doing whatever we want to while using and abusing Jesus’s name.

I am afraid we are in a time where the church must condemn what is in fact anti-gospel and anti-Christian as heretical and opposite to Jesus’s values.

I am afraid American exceptionalism is the net we must all untangle ourselves from if the church is to be faithful.

Once we see it, we can’t unsee it.

Of course, there is still great hope. Jesus is still calling disciples. The good still draws to itself the good. In our tradition we elect deacons and elders to help us. Leaders who commit themselves to following Jesus wherever he takes us, and living inside of God’s deeper reality. There is a pay-as-you-can diner in downtown Raleigh. When you go to the register, they say, “The suggested price for this meal is \$8, what are you able to pay?” If someone has \$4, that is what they pay. If someone can’t pay, they pay off their meal by working for an hour. Some are washing dishes, others bus tables or fold silverware. Look around and businesspeople are eating alongside the homeless. The rich and poor communing in the same space. The kingdom of God is breaking through. The vision was birthed among a bunch of Presbyterian church leaders. It took five years to get off the ground. Lots of doors closed, and others opened. What remained consistent was the calling: “Follow me.” Jesus is still calling. The good still draws to itself the good.

So we pray and listen and drop our nets when it doesn't align with a kingdom perspective. Once we see it, we can't unsee it. The kingdom is where? The kingdom is when? Thank God for that. Thank God for you. Amen.