

3 Epiphany
Mark 1:14-20
Jan. 25, 2015

Is the Kingdom of God more than a slogan?

Quite a few of us spent the last two days participating in the Trinity Institute theological conference titled ‘Creating Common Good.’ We talked about white privilege, inequality in education, disparity of wealth and resources, classism, uses of power, moral priorities, when does inequality become exploitation and sin. We are saturated and inspired.

I raise up two provocative questions from the conference in the context of today’s Scripture:

Is the Kingdom of God just a slogan, or do you believe that the world can be transformed?

Can you commit – mind, heart and body – to being an agent of transformation without knowing the outcome?

In today’s Scripture, we hear the stories of God’s call to Jonah and to the disciples. God’s call is an invitation to action. God’s call is also about taking on a new way of life, new identity. It is the invitation to commit, to enter into a *living* relationship with God. “Living” is a key word – it means that the relationship encompasses the unknown future. To answer God’s call is to step out into the unknown, to become a person whom God will use for God’s purposes.

Jesus begins his public ministry with the call to “repent and believe in the good news.” Repent, as in, change your assumptions about life in this world, and enter into a saving relationship with God. The disciples carried the good news far and wide in an incredibly short time. According to tradition and early historians, eight of the twelve died as martyrs, at least two of them – Peter and Andrew– were crucified.

There is a new app available to truck drivers from the State Dept. of Transportation. Enter the destination, size and weight of the truck, the app will provide the safest route for the trip. That got me thinking, what if there were an app to tell us the *safest* route for our life journey? Appealing? Perhaps. I think human beings are inherently risk adverse; some of the things that make us feel safer are status and the accumulation of material goods and wealth beyond our needs. But, would a safe app life route be a life worth living?

The way of the cross is the opposite of a safe journey app. Christians are called to live outside our comfort zone, to engage the world and other people, to seek the *common* good – the welfare of all. You know the baptismal vows: ‘striving for justice and peace, persevering in resisting evil, seeking and serving Christ in all persons.’ You can’t do a lot from the safety of your livingroom, and you can’t fulfill those vows by staying within the church walls, either. The Way of the Cross involves risk.

Jesus knew full well he would carry his ministry into dangerous waters. When he called the disciples, he gave them no assurance of safe journey. Simon, Andrew, James and his brother John laid down their nets and followed Jesus. They didn't ask where they were going, what their role was, or what the organization chart looked like. They just followed into the unknown. God's call, and the disciples' response of mind, heart and body: they *embody* their commitment.

Would you have done the same thing? What assurances would you need for you to drop what you are doing now and embark on a new way of living?

Making a commitment changes *you*. That's the distinction between the *call* to action, and the *response* of commitment. We may know what *action* the commitment involves (following Jesus, for the disciples) but we really don't know how we will be changed by it or where it will lead. Did you know what to expect of your baptismal commitment? Or did you step out into the unknown, a newly baptized Christian?

Some examples of commitment that changes us: marriage, you commit to a new way of living with a partner, but you don't really know what that will be like. You may divorce, but you will never again be single in the way you were before marriage. You are changed by marriage. Parenthood: mother or father – you have no idea what parenting will be like, and you are irrevocably changed by the new life. Being a parent is a broad brush, life-long change.

As hospital chaplain, I sometimes invite family members to make a commitment to a dying loved one that they will remain with the patient until death. The commitment is made with love and compassion, there is no way to know how that dying will be. Their shared commitment changes them in a spiritual and beautiful way.

Retirement is a commitment to a new way of life – one we generally spend a lot of time preparing for, developing a sort of 'safety app' for end of life years. Recently, there was a reflection in *Day by Day* written by a woman who retired, fully expecting to spend her golden years with family and friends. Then, she embarked on a short term of mission work in South America. When she returned home to visit family and grandchildren, she said she no longer fit into her old life. Her mission work had become like a new garment, and the carefully constructed comfort zone of family and friends in the U.S. no longer fit. Retirement was a new way of life, just not the one she expected.

Jonah's story is about being called by God and having trouble with the commitment response. You remember the story. Jonah is a fictional prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel sometime in mid-eighth century, b.c.. God directs Jonah to go to Nineveh, a foreign (Gentile) city of great wickedness, the capital of Assyria, enemies of Israel. God commissions Jonah to tell the people that God knows of their sinfulness. Jonah refuses, and runs the other way. Literally.

Jonah sets out on a boat heading in the opposite direction from Nineveh, and hides from God under a cover of tarps. The boat gets caught in a terrible storm brewed up by God, Jonah is

thrown overboard, swallowed by a whale, and after three days is spewed out of the whale's belly onto dry land just outside of Nineveh. Again, God insists that Jonah go; Jonah picks himself up off the beach and resignedly makes the day long trek to Nineveh. Jonah's prophecy is brief – *“forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”* He hovers nearby to watch the destruction.

The people of Nineveh listen to Jonah. Jonah is the only truly successful prophet in the Bible. They fast and put on sack cloth, public signs of their repentance; the rulers even put sack cloth on the animals. God spares the city.

Jonah is angry at God. What God told Jonah to say – *Nineveh shall be overthrown* – did not happen. God's merciful and saving action undermines Jonah's credibility as a prophet, he is proven false. Jonah cannot get beyond his egotistical view of himself as a prophet and as an Israelite. Jonah does not believe that the Gentiles, those godless enemies of Israel, deserve God's mercy. In classic 'them vs. us' thinking, Jonah sees *himself* condemned by God's salvation of the Ninevites: surely God can't be merciful to both Israel and its enemies.

Jonah did not want to go to a foreign city of sinners. Why? Because *he* judged them unworthy of redemption. Judging 'others' and egotism were the boundaries that defined Jonah's comfort zone, a barrier to Jonah's living relationship with God. Jonah was unable to make the commitment response to God's call.

Do you believe that God's redemptive mercy is really available to all? What does that bring up for you?

Mark's Gospel picks up the redemption theme this way, *‘the kingdom of God has come near.’*

Simon and Andrew were casting nets into the sea. *‘I will make you fish for people’* Jesus says. A call to action. Another translation might be “I will make you fishers of people” – call to new identity, commitment to a new way of life. What might it mean to be fishers of people? There is the in-gathering of a community. But what kind of community? Casting the net broadly, the catch is indiscriminate. *Whoever* comes is invited, welcomed, drawn into the kingdom. God's redemptive mercy available to all.

Who gets drawn into the Kingdom net in the Gospel accounts? Tax collectors, lepers, the lame, the blind, Samaritans, the poor, women and children – those whom the Jewish community did not value, and those they called 'other'. The nearly invisible, the marginalized.

The disciples talked about Kingdom, they didn't discuss theological theories about Christ. They were chosen to be witnesses to what God was doing, witness became their new identity. They heard, they observed, they believed, and they followed through, carrying the Good News message into the world. There was no safe travel app.

These two stories – calling Jonah and calling the disciples – weave together around some

questions. What did God need Jonah for? God was going to offer redemption to the Ninevites anyway. What does God need disciples for, if God is merciful and forgiving, and offers salvation to all?

If there is no safe travel – why would *we* respond to the call to follow Jesus?

One answer lies in whether we believe in the reality of the Kingdom. *‘The Kingdom of God has come near.’*

Early Christians recognized that the world was changed for all time by the appearance of the Christ, God’s incarnation. They also expected Christ to come again, very soon, and they believed that when Christ did come again, the entire world order would be changed. Mary’s *Magnificat* says it all.

The appointed time has grown short, Paul says. The new life, the new world order, is about to begin. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul counsels that the world is in transition, they are entering into the new life of God’s Kingdom. Buying property, accumulating things, social status, marrying the ‘right’ person – these are meaningless. God’s Kingdom begins on earth, it is real, and it is now.

The vision of new life, of what God will change, draws the disciples in, and it also draws Paul. The vision of Kingdom, how life will be transformed in a world of compassion, justice and peace, where the common good is the common goal, draws us in, too.

We need to deeply ask ourselves, do we really believe the Kingdom is more than a bumper sticker slogan?

Is there an alternative to social and economic inequality, to violence, to living in poverty? Do you see places where an alternative way of living is emerging?

Saying ‘yes’ to the possibility of the Kingdom, saying ‘yes, I believe that the world can and will be transformed,’ is the commitment which will help bring it into being.

The question of Christian identity looms large. *How* is your own life changed because you are a follower of Jesus?

The Kingdom has drawn near. Kingdom building requires concrete commitment. Will you commit?

Amen.

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