

3rd Sunday after Epiphany - Year A

If you think this morning's Gospel sounded more than vaguely familiar, it's because we heard the story of the calling of the first apostles – Andrew and Simon Peter - in *last week's* Gospel also. Last Sunday, in John's version of the story, John the Baptist and two of his disciples, one of whom was Andrew, see Jesus walking by. And John the Baptist says, "Look! Here is the Lamb of God!" – and Andrew and the other disciple follow Jesus after he invites them to "Come and see." And then Andrew goes off and gets his brother Peter, telling him he has found the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed. Andrew *brings* Simon to Jesus – who then names him Peter.

So why do we have such a different telling of this calling of Andrew and Peter in Matthew's version this morning? Well, you know how it is when families get together and start remembering the past, telling family stories, right? Mom remembers events one way, the kids another. It could be simply that the story of how Andrew and Simon first met Jesus just got mis-remembered by someone. It's equally plausible that it was important to the writer of John's gospel that Andrew had been a disciple of John the Baptist, or perhaps Matthew wanted to highlight that Andrew and Simon Peter were fisherman. Which one is right? My answer might be: What does it matter? If we ask "What is the truth?" – that leads us beyond the details into the heart of what we're being told in both versions: These disciples encountered Jesus in the midst of their day-to-day lives, whether that was a pursuit of the holy with John the Baptist or working for a living in a boat. And Jesus called them to "Come and see," to follow him, to move beyond where they were. And they were willing to respond, to let go of how they *had* been living and to learn a *new* way of living.

They encountered Jesus in the midst of their lives. He called them to follow *him*, they responded – by leaving behind one way of life and choosing another.

That's really the heart of the message that Matthew said Jesus "began to proclaim" when he heard John the Baptist had been arrested: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." - When I was a kid, we used to visit some friends who lived on a rural winding road, and at a particularly dangerous curve, someone had posted a huge sign on big oak tree – and the sign said, "REPENT! THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND!" in BOLD, red

letters. – The message I got was, “say your prayers, because you might crash and then go to hell!” But the word we most frequently hear translated as “repent” is actually “Metanoia” - and “metanoia” has much more to do with a change of mind and heart that has an effect in our lives than it does with what we usually think of as repentance.

A change of mind and heart that has effect in our lives: That’s what Jesus is preaching, and it’s what he calls his disciples to live into. So when Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” hear him saying this: “Have a change of mind and heart – because the Kingdom of God is at hand.” It’s at hand, nearby. That’s right here – not light years away. It is here – not up in the clouds out of sight. It is now - not waiting for us after we die.

This is what Jesus calls Andrew and Peter and all the other disciples to. It’s what Jesus call us to. He comes to meet us in the middle of our messy lives, sometimes when we’re praying with John the Baptist, and sometimes when we’re covered with the smell of fish. And he invites us to “come and see” and then to follow. And by the grace of God, we respond as best we’re able. That’s what our baptismal covenant, which we all renewed together two weeks ago on the feast of the Baptism, is all about. We have entered into a covenant, vowing that with God’s help, we will continue the life and passion of Jesus - We have promised to proclaim with our lives the Good News – the Love of God –...to serve others, to work for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of all.

It’s what we’re told, in this morning’s Gospel, that Jesus did: After calling his disciples, Matthew says, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” That is the mandate we’ve been given. It’s the common call given to all Christians.

Early on in the Christian community, though, there were already divisions instead of unity of purpose in responding to the call of Jesus. That divisiveness is part of what prompted Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” Corinth was a large city, and the Christian community there was really a gathering of several smaller “house churches” – people diverse in background and status and opinions. And they had begun to emphasize their differences – I belong to Paul; I belong to Cephas. I’m a Baptist. I’m an Episcopalian. I’m a Lutheran. And Paul calls them back to their common call, their common baptismal commitment: “Be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” He reminds them – and us – that they were all baptized into the cross of Christ, which he proclaims as the power of God. The cross of Christ – the power of God - is where violence is confronted with the resistance of love; where hatred and evil are met with forgiveness; where all divisions cease – because Jesus brings all things into the Oneness of God.

And that brings us to this time and place... and the question of how we live out our baptismal covenant, how we respond to the call of Jesus to preach the good news of the kingdom and cure every disease and sickness among the people.

We are living in a time of great divisiveness ourselves. There has so long been division among Christians, based on differences in belief about the inerrancy of Scripture or the proper way to pray. A division in the United Methodist church now looms over differences in belief about same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy, and we know how those issues wrangle in the Anglican Communion, as well. We are living in a time when differences in race and religion and national origin and gender and sexual orientation and social class are used to divide us even more. It is as if we are caught in focusing on the details of the story, the differences, and demanding to know which side or point of view is right. And it’s always mine, yes? When we get lost in the detail, when we focus on the differences that divide us, it is so easy to lose sight of that common mind and purpose that is the mission of Jesus into which we’re baptized.

Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe lays it out in the epigraph to his book Things Fall Apart. He quotes from Yeats' famous poem written after the devastation of World War I, perhaps prophetic of all that led to World War II. Yeats' writes about a falcon, who is sent out and *should* return to the falconer, but has strayed too far away:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart, the center cannot hold;*

Things fall apart. It is so easy to get out of earshot of the voice of God, when we focus on what divides us instead of what draws us into one.

When we are sent, like Jesus, to heal every disease and sickness among the people, we are sent to heal today the disease of disinterest, the sickness of malaise, the cancer of divisiveness. We are called to choose to live in the kingdom of God present among us now – meaning we are called to resist violence, to meet hatred with love. There will always be difference. Difference, otherwise known as diversity, is the gift of God. It is an *expression* of God. God looks at all that God makes – light and darkness, sea and dry land, earth and sky – and pronounces it Good.

Things fall apart, the center does not hold, when we get caught in the differences, the details, and lose sight of the truth underneath it all: Jesus meets us in the midst of our lives, and calls us to a change of mind and heart that leads us beyond where we are now into the common purpose of the kingdom of God, which is to bring all things into the Oneness of God.

As we prayed in opening Collect:

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

+++++

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

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.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

+++++