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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ Jesus' First Words: The Kingdom of God is Near

The Rev. Matt Gough ~ January 29, 2012

Matthew 4:17-22

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.

You may have heard or been forwarded through email the story of a successful businessman on vacation on a tropical island. He was walking along the beach when he came across a local leaning against some rocks fishing with a pole. He asked him, “Catch anything?” The local said, “Not yet”.

The businessman assessed the locals simple clothes calloused bare feet and next said, “You know if you were to set up a couple more poles and use the right bait you could double or triple your catch in a day.”

The local without lifting his gaze from the horizon asked, “Why would I want to do that?” The businessman, just as puzzled by the locals answer continued, “Well then you could sell those fish at the market and have money to buy a small boat and a net and catch a lot more fish.” The local, again without taking his gaze off the far off sea, asked again, “and why would I want to do that?” The businessman, frustrated at this man's lack of any basic business sense and drive replied, “Well man, with more fish you make more money and you could buy more boats, hire more fishermen, and catch even more fish.” Again, the man, gaze fixed peacefully and steadily ahead said, “Why would I want to do that?”

The businessman, his face red and sweat beginning to bead across his forehead practically yelled, “Well then you can retire and spend your time going somewhere beautiful and doing what you love most!!” With this the local lifted his eyes and with confidence and contentment met the exasperated eyes of the businessman and said, “What do you think I am doing now?”

This humorous modern parable conveys both two different opinions of what paradise is,

what the ideal life is, and two different methods of how to find it. We all have our ideal life. When we begin talking about the Kingdom of heaven, we enter a world where there is a wide spectrum of beliefs about what it is and how we find it or get into it or experience it.

The basics of Orthodox Christian tradition holds the belief that heaven is the realm of God and that earth has become a fallen and sinful and separated place from heaven and God. Heaven is real and the ideal, Earth falls short of the ideal. That's the problem, and the solution is that God comes in Jesus to save us and reconcile a fallen humanity and earth to The Kingdom of God and ultimately make them one again. Christ brings us back to the ideal.

Within this we have the spectrum of just what it means to say that, in Jesus, the Kingdom of heaven is near. There are all sorts of views on the answers to the 'who, what, where, when and how' of the ultimate ideal. We all have thoughts about what heaven looks like and how we are to experience it.

On one end you have those who see Jesus purely as a means for a yet to be realized and established reign of God. Jesus offers a spiritual salvation. The purpose of Jesus is only to get us into heaven and give us eternal life with God. Those at this end of the spectrum are suspicious of any environmentalism and skeptical of social justice because they really believe the only important thing is the spiritual conversion of people to a belief in Jesus as Lord before He comes again. On the other end of this spectrum is a belief that the Church, with Christ as her head and empowered by the Spirit, is called to reverse the effects of sin and make this world more and more like the Kingdom.

This end of the spectrum fuels the drive for many social, economic, racial, and environmental justice and peacemaking movements and may not prioritize a spiritual conversion above other real needs people have.

Now if you're like me, you are somewhere in the middle of that spectrum.

When Jesus preaches that the Kingdom of heaven is near, what does he mean?

Last week I suggested that Repent means, first and foremost, a turning towards God and that Christ is the one who has made this possible to do without the need of temple sacrifices, laws or any requirements other than faithful acceptance of this great gift we have been given. Our King has come to rule his Kingdom, which begins in each of our hearts.

The very fact that Jesus has said that the Kingdom has come near implies that he has come to a world where that did not resemble God's ideal. We are not living the ideal and things

are not the way they are meant to be and created to be.

I think we have to borrow from other parts of society to help understand this. There is a building movement in our country that is reacting to the industrialization of our food sources and our poor health. Statistics and studies are revealing just how, as a nation, unhealthy we really are and that the primary cause is really the way we eat, the over processing of food combined with the more sedentary vocations we hold.

I've never been one to eat tons of fast food and junk food (hard to avoid in youth ministry) but, like many people, already have some daily pills I have to take. The doctor recently told me that my cholesterol had gotten too high.

He was saying to me that I was sick and my health was not ideal, the warning signs were there, and if nothing is done about it then my quality of life and even my life itself was being put at risk.

I think we can talk about our spiritual life in similar terms. Whatever the beliefs, I think we can look at the world and say, "We are spiritually sick. We are diseased. We can no longer deny it or avoid it. The pathways of the Spirit are being clogged and blocked. The evidence for this is easy for us to point out.

We may all point to different things we call symptoms but they are real. Usually we point to a '*them*'. *Those people* who are oppressing and murdering their own citizens are spiritually sick. *Those people* who are preventing so many people from clean water and food are spiritually sick. *Those people* who caused such economic catastrophes because of greed are sick and diseased. It's always easier to point it out in *others*.

But when it comes to us we sometimes like to think that we are living a little closer to an ideal and are more spiritually healthy.

Americans do that because we tend to be materialistic and think that because we have more we must be healthy.

We like to not think about our own spiritual disease. But sometimes there is a doctor who has to confront us with what's happening underneath and tell us we haven't been living God's ideal and that the pursuit of our ideal may actually be making us and others sicker.

One example is that we strive so much to collect things and stuff yet do not want to really discover what it takes for all of our stuff to be made and the conditions of the workers who make it. Lately, the New York Times and other publications have been revealing the great human toll our consumerism is having on workers and their physical and psychological health.

We can choose not to think about it but underneath our spiritual pathways are clogging and hardening.

I know many of you would not call your current life an ideal life, you've told me as much. So many who work in our tech industry now do not come home until after dinner. Rather than encouraging people to balance their lives with a home life, companies are bringing the comforts and functions of the home into their businesses. Workers with families may feel the pressure in this economy to work longer and harder to stay ahead or on par with those without such commitments who work long hours. Our dinner tables are not complete, if we even manage to eat around the table anymore. Study after study has shown that children who grow up eating with their family around a table are much less likely to engage in risky behavior, to be depressed, and to more likely to succeed in school. It's a proven, healthier, more ideal way to live and yet in today's world it seems like an impossible ideal to maintain. We feel trapped and powerless to do anything about it.

We are sick, caught in a diseased system, unsure of how to stop it.

We want it to stop. I've lost count of the number of conversations I've had with young families within the church and PELC community whom I've talked with and who hold onto the hope of one day moving away from here to somewhere where they could live a more balanced and ideal life.

Unfortunately this affects the church too. With more people being busier than ever with work or with only a transitory investment in the community, combined with growing demand for commitments from schools, sports and clubs the church struggles to find people able to be involved in the ministries of the church. Programs then are cut back or staff takes on more and more, more staff may be hired and budgets increase.

The youth are throwing a thank you social today and are indeed grateful for all this church does to support the group. Yet underneath the ministry is hanging on with a skeletal crew of dedicated adults who carry the burden of ministering to the many amazing, delightful and spiritually alive teens who come to group. As much as we do celebrate the vibrancy we have, we too are showing signs that we are spiritually diseased. The quick and easy fixes that we used to rely upon aren't working anymore. There is no pill for this. Something deeper needs to happen. My doctor gave me a choice to correct my high cholesterol. The first choice was to take another pill which was supposed to return everything back to its idyllic state.

A pill is so convenient, but I know that it does not truly make me healthy. The answer has to be deeper than that and the pill will only mask the symptoms of unhealthiness. The second choice was to change my diet and exercise more. I knew what I really had to do, to really be physically healthy and it wasn't just a temporary change, it would involve a comprehensive deeper change.

When we finally look around and within and see and accept just how unhealthy we are, then we're ready for the great physician.

It's into this unhealthiness that Jesus comes and says to us that the reign of God is near, close by, and not a far off future event.

Luke records Jesus' first public words in Luke chapter 4.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. (Emphasis mine)

How is Jesus backing up his claim that the Kingdom of heaven is near? He heals, opens eyes, and frees.

He comes and gives us the good news that even in the midst of all this unhealthiness the kingdom, the realm of God, can break through and is being fulfilled. No matter how far your circumstances are from what you think is the ideal, heaven is near. No matter how spiritually unhealthy you feel, God is near, promising you that God's will can and will be done through unhealthy people.

The very next thing Jesus does is begin to call people to follow.

With the authority only a King could muster, he calls people to completely change their

lives and follow. And many do. The disciples leave their nets; leave the familiar and the safe. They say, “OK! It’s time!” And they go.

We may not be able to bring the ideal to the world or completely cure spiritual disease but Jesus calls us, just as he called his disciples, to the work of healing, opening eyes, proclaiming freedom, proclaiming the Lord's favor.

One of the most valuable things this church does for its youth is to provide an experience, that we call Caravan, where students go off somewhere for a week of service-learning. This isn’t about going to help those spiritually unhealthy people.

It’s always the case that those people actually teach us about what it means to know that all we really need is God. Often they have very little yet have a peace and joy that comes from a faith that walks daily with Christ. We learn from them that all the ideals we pursue are nothing compared with the ideal of letting Christ reign completely in your life.

Christ is the ideal. Christ is heaven. Christ is near. No matter how far our circumstances may be from what we would like them to be may we know that the true ideal is with us, guiding us, and calling us.