

The Timeless Call of Jesus

Sermon by
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It is the last Sunday in the month of January – the time for us to have our annual Congregational Meeting. It is the time for us to hear about what the different groups of the church have been doing, to look over the church budget, to elect new officers, to ask questions, make comments, and do other things that congregations do at such gatherings.

Compared with other faith traditions, our congregational meetings are – usually - rather tame affairs. Like most Christian traditions, we state firmly that the head of the church is Jesus Christ, but for us the leading governing authority is the Session, the elected elders of this church. In our Book of Order there is a very short list of the specific items that a congregation can vote on. Not only that, but we have the whole “decently and in order” thing going on, and we Presbyterians have a reputation for not getting excited about a whole lot and having a process for just about everything.

But we may also know that the time in which we have this morning’s Congregational Meeting is not like the other times we have known. The litany of economic woes facing us is lifted up during worship almost every Sunday, as if we needed to be reminded of how hard these times are. It might be one thing if we had an idea of how long these tough times would last. We could say, well, we can make it until next week and then things will turn around. Or next month. Or in six months. We might even be able to say ‘next year, things will be better,’ and find some kind of solace in at least knowing that there is a time limit here. But such is the nasty thing about our time. We don’t know how long these difficult days will last. It may get better next week, next month, next year, but then again it may not.

It is time for our annual Congregational Meeting, and it is held in a time in which financial concerns have not been greater for many of us. The convergence of those two areas is the reason why many of you have received phone calls and e-mails, imploring your attendance this meeting. The financial condition of our church, like the financial condition of many organizations, is much more problematic this year than in the past. But there is a spiritual dimension in all of this that comes with the exercise of our financial stewardship, the giving of money so that the ministry of Jesus Christ will thrive. We all know how important it is to give to the church; we have heard from our youth the importance of giving to the church, that this is an exercise of faith as well as financial accountability. We may have heard the call to give a tithe - ten percent - so that the church may do the work it is called to do. We may even know that if most of us gave just half of that amount the problem would not be how can we make ends meet, but how can we give this extra money to ministries that need it.

But unfortunately, that’s not our problem. We have to take a cold, hard, realistic look at the times in which we live and realize that some people cannot give as much as they once did.

This is no place for guilt trips or tear-jerking appeals. We are supportive of the church's work and we want to heed the call, that's why we are here. But we live in tough economic times, and the church needs to realize that just like everyone else. It is time to tighten our belts, do more with less, make cuts and deal with the times in which we live.

But there is another sense of time. It is called Church Time, or the Liturgical Calendar. It is the sweep of time that we recognize only here, and only by some. The time says that we are in the Season of Epiphany, begun when the Wise Men came from the East and gave gifts to the Christ child. As such, Epiphany can lay claim to something that no other season of the church can: It is a time for us to reach out to others.

Oh sure, there is Christmas, when we celebrate Jesus being born. There is Lent, when we remember our sinful state and seek repentance. There is Easter when we celebrate Christ's resurrection. There is Pentecost when we honor the gifts of the Spirit given to us. But all of these seasons do have a kind of inner-drive to them. They appeal to self-reflection and self-empowerment. Nothing wrong with that, nothing at all. We need that, in order to remember who we are, why we are here.

But Epiphany, more than the other seasons, directs us out into the world. Epiphany was the time when Gentiles, outsiders, nonbelievers, came to Jesus. And Epiphany is the time when we remember that Jesus' message is about time, but not just any time. It is about God's time, about God's reign, about God's purposes for us and for others. It is the time for us to behold the ways that God is sending us out from ourselves and out from our churches, out into a world so that others may know of the Good News which has claimed us. It is time, in other words, for us to remember that the Kingdom of God is not some place for us to go. It is within us, it is around us, it is who we are. It is the love God has given to us through Christ, a love that compels us not to stay where we are, but to extend ourselves out to others so that they, too, may experience that love and that call.

The text for this Epiphany Sunday in which we have a Congregational Meeting is a text about time. The right time has come, Jesus proclaims from our Good News Bible. The Kingdom of God is near – or at hand. That means Jesus is telling us that the Kingdom of God is not off in the future, nor is it a relic of our past. It is the present. It is our present. It is our time, right here, right now. The Kingdom of God is where Jesus is, it is seen in how Jesus lives.

And it is where Jesus calls us. As the Lord walks along the Sea of Galilee, we know we have heard this text before. Many times. "I will make you fishers of men..." we used to sing in Sunday School. We got a little older and we sang another song about this:

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
Of our life's wild, restless sea,
Day by day his voice is sounding,
Saying "Christian, follow me."

The time has come for us to hear his call, we might say, and follow Jesus. Time to get out of the boat. Time to follow in step behind Jesus and get out there and tell all those people they better step in line, too, if they know what's good for them. But I wonder if that's all this text is about. I wonder if all that is here is about pulling ourselves up by our own proverbial bootstraps. In a sermon on this text, Barbara Brown Taylor sounds a different note about what time it is:

“Can you hear it? This is no story about the power of human beings to change their lives, to leave everything behind and follow. This is a story about the power of God – to walk right up to a quartet of fishermen and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating disciples where there were none just a moment before.

“This is not a story about us. This is a story about God, and about God's ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who are able to follow – able to follow because we cannot take our eyes off the one who calls us, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives, because he seems to know what we hunger for and because he seems to be food.

“It is a miracle, and to look at it any other way is to deform the story, twisting it into a tall tale about four courageous fishermen who sacrificed all to serve their Lord. They did no such thing. If they did anything under their own power at all, it was simply that they allowed themselves to fall in love. Jesus showed up, they took one look at each other, and the rest was history. God acted, and the disciples let their nets wash out into the sea.”

It's time, in other words, to depend on fishing less and God more for these disciples. They heard a call from beyond themselves for something wonderful and dangerous at the same time, and they chose it anyway even though it was way beyond their comfort levels, even though it called them into an unpredictable future. We can speculate all we want to about why they did that, but is that really important? What counts is that through Jesus God made the call to them. And because of God's incredible and persistent grace, the call continues – it continues to us. Jesus does call us, but Jesus doesn't just call us once. Jesus calls us again and again and again. He may be calling us to leave home and go off into some foreign land, but he may also be calling us to minister where we are. He may be calling us to reach out in love to those who love us; but he may also be calling on us to reach out to the last people we want to love. He may be calling on us to feed the hungry in a soup kitchen, or he may be calling on us to feed someone's soul by taking the time to be with them and hold their hand.

There are different circumstances, but the call comes. And when it comes it calls us to move out beyond ourselves. It doesn't always call us to stick with the familiar, with the easy to figure out, with the people we have always known. The call comes in a line item on a budget that says, “Faith in God,” and people scratching their heads and wondering where is that money going to come from. But maybe it's time to trust and believe that God will make it happen, maybe even praying that it may come through me.

The right time has come, Jesus said. The Kingdom of God is at hand. A Kingdom that is not ours to manipulate or control. A Kingdom that calls us to come and be a part of, a Kingdom that is not an activity we participate in but a new way of life. Jesus' love for us is so deep and so wonderful that the call is timeless, and persistent. We can answer that call only when we let God move in our lives to do so. But the good news – the really good news – is that God has done that. God did it through Andrew and Simon, through James and John. And God can do it again - through us. Amen.

Bible text is Mark 1:14-20

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