

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 23, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 50:4-10 and Matthew 4:17-23

FROM THE SIDELINES

It was just a for-fun email survey for learning more about one's friends, but one very ordinary question made me pause: "What is your favorite sport?" Hmm, to play or to watch? Would I see myself in the game or on the sidelines?

Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John to leave their fishing behind and follow him. He will now shift the focus of their lives and efforts from fish to people, from sustaining themselves to helping God relate to others in ways that give life and hope. Jesus announces that God has come in a new way to confront the world and engage with its people, interacting with them to draw them out of the old and into the new. He represents, not a theory or even a religion, but the life-giving, life-changing presence of God, and what Jesus represents to these four fishermen, he will now begin teaching them to represent to other people. The word disciple indicates a student, and the course of study is life in the presence of God. This course is interactive, because God has not come merely to be present, as though to be recognized, worshiped, and adored. No, God's is a loving, caring, healing presence that intrudes into a world of people estranged from each other and so laced with all the evils and sufferings estrangement breeds among us.

God's coming is confrontational. If I don't care what happens to other people as long as I and those I love get what we want, then I have set myself to collide with God's love for those people about whose lives and well-being I am indifferent. Think of the folly of doing harm to a bear cub when the mother is close by. People who believe God has no anger because God is love don't know much about love. The problem — God's problem — is that selfishness, greed, and indifference pervade the whole human race, and so God cannot simply get rid of the bad apples. When we remember Jesus' suffering, humiliation, and death by torture, we are supposed to see what humanity did to him present before our eyes in what we human beings continue to do to each other. Otherwise, we misuse his crucifixion as nothing better than a magical solution to our own ultimate problem of death. Jesus did not give himself just to change our final destination. He gave himself to change us and our world.

Jesus calls those four fishermen from the sidelines. They have never had time to be religious like the Pharisees, watching every aspect of life to make sure it is done properly in accordance with the long list of rules added to the commandments of God. Fishermen were

not likely to be full-time religionists because their life was hard. Yesterday, a devotional magazine offered this summary: “The sun rises, we awake, we go to work, we entertain ourselves. The sun sets, we sleep, we awake to start the cycle again. That’s life.” The four fisherman could have agreed, except that they probably had little time or means for entertaining themselves. Life back then was hard and brief. By forty, if he reached it, a man was likely to be worn out, and a woman who survived her childbearing years still pain-free enough to be thankful to awaken in the morning could count herself exceptionally blessed. Jesus called his disciples from among those who were not especially religious.

Life matters because our lives matter to God, but we don’t really understand how and why until we realize how much the other person’s life matters to God, also. We have taught ourselves the human life is competitive, but God created it to be cooperative. Our rebellion against needing God and needing each other also gives us what we call sin. Estrangement is the nature of sin, and indifference to the well-being of others the source of the evils we do. Jesus teaches us that God’s question is not, “How well have you done compared to others?” but, “What kind of person are you in relation to others?”

As we grow up, we learn to categorize what we see, hear, and experience, and by adulthood we may have our categories quite firmly established so that all new information or experience gets forced into those same old categories, which we tend to regard by how they make us feel. Each category has its set of feelings and responses that enable us to get through the day without having to treat every occurrence as something new and different. That’s okay, I suppose, until something really is new and different. Jesus explains by telling us one does not put new wine into old wineskins because the fresh wine will burst the old skins. His critics and opponents put everything he said and did into their same old categories of right and wrong. Right meant rewarding the virtuous (them) and punishing the sinful (others). So, when Jesus forgave the people considered sinful by the very religious and even broke the rules to heal broken people, the virtuous condemned him. Their religious practice was competitive, and they saw themselves as the rightful winners.

Jesus came with an announcement and called for a response. “Repent,” he said, “for the kingdom of God has come near.” I think that when they hear the word “repent,” most people (who don’t make a joke of it) associate it with feelings of guilt, fear, and maybe even of shame. We categorize repentance as a religious fix for a religious problem, and unless for some reason we are suffering from real guilt or shame about our lives, we formalize this whole repentance thing so we can get it done and over without letting the bad feelings get to us. Hence the popularity of the Christian thinking that says, “Jesus did it all for us; so just pile your sins onto him, and he’ll take of them for you.” I’m reminded of the convenience of the garbage disposal unit in the sink which takes care of the garbage before it even has time to become garbage but still looks fine and has no unpleasant odor.

The word for “repent” means to turn, and so, sure, it has the sense of turning away from the false, hurtful, and destructive, but Jesus uses it primarily for *turning toward* God who has come near to reclaim us and our world for life, healing, and wholeness. So, the primary feelings are not guilt, fear, and shame but rather those associated with anticipation of something very good. Will the whole process of turning be easy and pleasant? No, of course not. God’s grace is not a convenient garbage disposal unit. What’s wrong with me is part of me and who I have become, and so freedom from what’s wrong with me requires my becoming a new and different person, especially in relation to other people and other groups of people. Our greatest sins against God come from dehumanizing God’s other children. But the primary thrust of Jesus’ call to repent turns us toward God, life, hope, and salvation so we can start becoming new enough to leave the old behind.

If you want to learn thoroughly and imprint deeply upon your mind something you have already learned formally, agree to teach it to students you care about. A good teacher cares about the students’ learning, a poor teacher merely about covering the material and drilling the students for a test. Jesus calls fishermen to become his students (disciples) so they can, in turn, teach others to trust God and be changed by that trust. That’s the task of the church: to teach people to trust God and learn to hope for what God promises for the salvation and healing of this world. If we expect to teach others such lessons, we had better remain Jesus’ students all our lives.

Just as surely as he called those four fishermen to leave their nets and follow him, Jesus calls us from the sidelines of life. What his call means for each particular person varies greatly and cannot be standardized in the delusion that one size fits all. But it will be a summons to turn and begin living in the trusted presence of God, and the changes God’s grace makes in us will be not only expressed but also developed and made real in the transformation of our relatedness with other people. Greed must give way to humble generosity, indifference to empathy and compassion, bitterness to gratitude, and cynicism to hope. Which reminds me — I think the way to develop hope is not so much to seek it for ourselves as to try to open doors and clear paths for hope for others. I think hope is something we get mostly by giving it, sharing it, and removing barriers to it. Otherwise, it may become nothing more than self-prescribed optimism, a sort of locker room pep talk with nobody else listening.

Our lives matter to God, and what matters most is not our successes in competition but the kind of people we are becoming in relation to others. The specifics vary, of course, because each of us is unique, and with God it’s always personal, but one way or another, Jesus continues to call to us, “Get up from the sidelines of life, and come, follow me.” Amen.