

Third Sunday after Epiphany
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
January 26, 2020

We heard Jesus proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” And arguably, this is one of the most important phrases in Matthew’s gospel. It’s the same phrase that John the Baptist used. It’s a similar phrase used by Jesus when he sent the disciples. It’s the summary of the whole gospel of Matthew in one sentence. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.”

Now, today’s gospel didn’t try to sugar coat this message. We were given a glimpse of how this ideology will impact the proclaimer. For, John the Baptist proclaimed this same message, and today, we heard that John was arrested. And, if you remember how the rest of John’s life went in Matthew’s gospel, then you know that he will mostly be in prison and then, Herod will have John’s head chopped off and presented to Herodias’ daughter. So, we know that this is not a trendy ideology, it is not a safe belief, and it is certainly not a tolerated message.

And, I think Jesus knew that. He knew that this message would disrupt existing structures. Jesus knew that this ideology would draw attention from some powerful people. Jesus knew that the kingdom of heaven coming near isn’t always received with joy.

So, when Jesus heard of John’s arrest, he withdrew. He withdrew to a place that was, as one author puts it, an arid backwater that was only sparsely settled by landless cast-offs from Judea. Jesus settled into a town of about a thousand people where the

economy was supported by farmers and fishers. While he did withdraw, Jesus did not turn away from his ministry. For, there—among the poor, the outcast, and the rejected— there, Jesus began recruiting for his ministry.

And, looking at Jesus’s business plan, I can’t imagine present-day investors would support this startup filled with a bunch of know-nothing rejects who were to embark on a dead-end journey to failure. After all, history revealed that this “kingdom of heaven”-thing was an absurd pipedream. But that’s the thing about a disruptive idea—first, it’s absurd. After all, it was absurd to think that you and I would get into a stranger’s car, instead of a well-vetted taxi. It was absurd to think that you or I would even consider buying shoes through the mail without trying them on. You see, sometimes it’s only the absurd that can break through the status quo to bring about transformation.

So, Jesus goes walking down the shoreline to gather some people to join him in exploring and, perhaps, even to embrace the absurd. He happened to call a pair of brothers that were fishermen. Now, it’s important that we remember that a key industry in this town was the export fish. And, Jesus invited these brothers to reject economic stability and the safety those nets gave. Jesus asked them to withdraw both their ideological and physical support from the economic backbone of the town and to join him in the unknown. Jesus called them to drop their nets and pick up their voices. To exchange moving among the fish for moving among the people. To imagine an existence that would not be built on catching fish to feed the economic machine, but, instead, an existence that was built on transforming hearts to love.

And, that’s where all that healing of diseases and sickness comes into play throughout Jesus’s ministry. Jesus went to people with viruses and pains, people with differing

abilities and low energy, he went to those with mental illness and to those with physical limitations. Jesus took people who were liabilities to the economic engine and showed that they were assets in the kingdom of heaven.

You see, those sick people reflected the world of Jesus's time. Dr. Warren Carter notes that Roman imperial structures and practices were bad for people's health. Some 70-90% of folks in Rome's empire experienced varying degrees of poverty resulting from limited understanding of hygiene, intense social stress, poor water quality, and food insecurity. These factors led to disease associated with poor nutrition (like blindness and muscle weakness) along with a lack of immunity (that is, things like diarrhea and cholera).¹ In a world where one's physical body was mostly required for work, these diseases were not inconvenient, they were a death sentence. Without a working body, then there was no food, and without quality food there was not a working body. It was a vicious cycle for most, and it was a cycle that was perpetuated by those in power.

And, that ancient cycle is the same cycle we struggle with today. In Cook County, we see that food insecurity is disproportionately high among adults with disabilities.² And, a recent study of "food deserts"—that is, of communities lacking access to nutritious food—they found that while Chicago has seen an increase in total number of supermarkets, those new supermarkets were not located in the places that had little access and so the segregated, low income regions never benefited.³ Add in the complexity of requiring more money to secure healthy food; balancing multiple jobs, childcare, and traffic; the need to have extra time for public transportation or access to a reliable car to get you to the store; and then the time needed to prepare the

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3138

² <https://www.chicagosfoodbank.org/disabilities-food-insecurity/>

³ <https://makosak.github.io/publication/ChiFoodAccess>

nutritious food to the lack of access, then it's no wonder that food insecurity impacts roughly 1 in 7 people in Chicago,⁴ and that world-wide food insecurity has grown for the past three years in a row.⁵ Just like in Jesus's time, without food, the body cannot work; without a working body, there is little chance to acquire food. It is a devastating economic cycle.

Jesus proclaimed: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Or, to put it another way, turn from the current ways and move towards God's vision of love. Turn from selfish desires to hoard and waste food, and turn toward a vision where food provides life for all. Turn away from the structures within our society that stunt life, and turn towards God's vision where love brings life. Turn towards God's kind of government where presidents and prime ministers, where kings and rulers, where elected leaders and governors, where emperors and czars all play by God's rules. Turn towards God's world where honor comes by serving, where non-violence is the ultimate weapon, where forgiveness outdoes revenge, and where true wealth is gained by giving it all away.

You see, Jesus's message is going to disrupt all of humankind— from religious leaders to government officials, from the fishers who lost their workforce to the masses of people who found life within a society designed for their demise. This message that Jesus preaches will disrupt. This message is one that brings life among the dead. This message is one that communicates that God is here, right now, in this place, among us, in us, and working through us.

⁴ <https://www.chicagosfoodbank.org/hunger-in-our-community/>

⁵ <http://www.fao.org/3/I9553EN/i9553en.pdf>

And, so as we gather, we are challenged to be holy disrupters. For, we do not disrupt for our own sake; but rather, we disrupt so that we can lovingly work to better grasp God's vision for the world. That's why we gather each month with The Night Ministry to feed those who are food insecure, because with that action we disrupt a culture built around that able-bodied work is synonymous with food. That is why we recognize and advocate for a shared humanity for *all* people without exception, because with that action we disrupt the systems that privilege the few. And, that is why we gather around this table—a place where we bring ourselves with all our baggage, with all our uncertainty, and with all that we are—for, when we gather here, we experience God's vision, we discover the kingdom of heaven, given for all, equally, justly, and lovingly. And, when we stand in our diversity with all its beauty, there we disrupt a world that wants to segregate and simply tolerate. There, we say, “we repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Amen.