

Sermon

January 22, 2023

Pastor Terry Kylo

Would you please pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

So, when I was in PLU, Pacific Lutheran, going to school, I got a social work degree and we had to do some basic counseling courses. And one of the things that we were taught is that sometimes when a family engages you, they will come with a “presenting problem.” You know, sort of a story that they’re telling about the issues that they’re facing and sometimes they’ll even have an identified patient that is a member of the family who has kind of taken the blame for everything. And we were taught to kind of look beneath that – we were also taught some humility, because, you know, families know their own situation, too – but sometimes you’ve got to look a bit deeper.

And you know, I’ve been a pastor for 32 years. I’ve preached a couple of sermons, done a lot of Bible study. You know, I went to seminary; I took religion classes at PLU as well, and listened to lots of sermons, and lots of late-night conversations about this Christianity thing. And I’ve got to say that, you know, the “presenting issue” that I learned as a kid, sitting in pews very much like yours here, really doesn’t fly with me anymore.

And the presenting problem that I was told was kind of twofold. One was that Jesus came to start a new religion: he’s like a religious Ray Kroc, you know, going to start McDonald’s. Only Jesus is starting the Christians, with that body and McBlood combination, you know.

The second thing that of course, Jesus comes to do, I was told, was that God has a kind of a character issue; God can’t forgive without being paid off. And Jesus – thanks be to God – does the payment for us, because God can’t forgive unless, you know, God gets something in return.

And that’s terrible.

First of all, the first presenting problem tells us that Christianity is the only true religion; that God is captured inside of it; that our Jewish neighbors are a part of a faith that no longer fits the world and isn’t faithful to God. And of course, what that tends to do, quite subconsciously, perhaps, is to tell us that they were the problem and we’re the solution.

History, I think has taught us otherwise.

The second of course, is equally horrific. Because when my one daughter – I had twins, they’re now 28 – When one daughter, like, didn’t clean her room, I didn’t have to punish the *other* girl in order to forgive the first. That doesn’t make any sense, right?

We would go in and have a conversation about how clean the room was, and why it was an important thing to do. And we'd work it out, work out our forgiveness and reconciliation, you know, between us.

And besides, in the Hebrew scripture, it's very clear that God is steadfast in God's love and "slow to anger in abounding and steadfast love." Seemed confusing to me as a little kid, to hear that God requires Jesus suffering to forgive us, but then God is also steadfast and loving and all this other kind of stuff.

But what we do in the Protestant traditions, and in most traditions around the world, whenever they enter into a time of change, is, we don't just critique the tradition and throw it out the window, right? We go back to the tradition to *critique* the tradition. And what better text today than Matthew, chapter four, for us to do a little bit of that?

So, the Gospel text begins with John the Baptizer, who was challenging Herod, who was a client king for the Roman Caesar, challenging him on many different levels. And John, a perceived threat to Herod's reign, was arrested. And later on, if you know the story, we know that at some point, John, the Baptizer, his head was removed from connection with his body, to kind of conclude, making sure that he would not be a threat.

And in that context, then, Jesus begins his ministry.

So, Jesus understood quite well that he himself would be putting himself at risk. And there was something that he was longing for, something he thought was so valuable, that he was willing to risk his life for it. Because his cousin John had already been arrested.

And then we come to this beautiful text from Isaiah, talking about a people who sat in darkness, and who have seen a great light – and in the context of Isaiah, the most often-quoted prophet in the Christian scriptures, the context of the writing is that the people of Israel had been taken from Israel and been enslaved in the land of Babylon. And the Prophet says that, yes, there's going to be a road that's going to go through Galilee, and you're going to be out of here, and you're no longer going to be enslaved.

Why would the text say this? Well, quite simply because, as I've learned over 32 years of trying to think about what this Christian thing is all about, what this "following Jesus" thing is all about, that Jesus was very concerned that a similar situation was happening during his time. Only this time, they weren't being taken out of the land of Israel and enslaved, they were being *enslaved in place*. They had been colonized by the Roman Empire, who was stealing a lot of their money, was oppressing people and starting to do something even worse: making people emulate the Roman way.

And what was that? Well, if you know what a bully is, you know what that way is, right? They believed that if you're only really human to the degree that you have power over other people and to the degree that you have status. And so they placed

people into this kind of context of constant competition, for status, for a positive reputation, for money, and for food.

And so, the writer Matthew begins to tell the story that yes, there was this danger that Jesus knew he was taking on, because he believed that his people were being enslaved by a bullying empire and that his own people were starting to emulate the bullies, and starting to bully each other.

And so then Jesus begins to go out and begins to proclaim, after we move to Capernaum, “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.”

“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” Well, we’ve turned that into, you know, the Kingdom of Heaven must be “Heaven.” So, Heaven’s come near. And so Jesus is fighting for us, you know, our pathway to get to heaven when we die. He’s making our little Stairway to Heaven, you know?

And, but that’s not what it means at all. Matthew uses the term “heaven” here, because he’s writing to a primarily Jewish community who had a spiritual practice of not saying God’s name aloud. (And of course, that’s a great spiritual practice, which we might, you know, want to take on, too, because it kind of reminds us that even though we use a name for God, we don’t own God. God is bigger than anything we can think or feel or imagine about God.)

So: he’s saying the same thing that Mark and Luke are saying, “Repent for the Kingdom of God has come near.” Well, what kingdom is he talking about replacing?

The Kingdom of Rome. The kingdom of the bullies.

And in that kingdom, Romans claimed ownership of a lot of things. They installed huge taxation systems, as I’ve talked about before, *and they claimed ownership of all the water and everything that was in it.*

This was very significant. Because one of the key sources of protein for everyday poor people was to go to the lake or go to the river and catch a fish. If you’re really hungry, you can go do that. There are people today in America who still get up, “I’m hungry,” and you go get your fish. But the Romans made it essentially illegal to do that.

So, when he walked beside the Sea of Galilee – and I’ve been lucky enough to walk beside those shores, hear the waves blowing from the southern wind – He sees these two professional fisher-people. And he says to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

And of course, you know, throughout my career, when I first began, I was taught, well, you know, what that means is that it’s your job in the pews, our job together as a community, to go out and make other people Christian, because Christianity is the only religion that matters. So, you should get out there and recruit, baby. How many notches do you got on your Bible? Do you have enough?

But that's not what it means at all, I think, in the first century, because Biblical scholars have been helping us to clue back in to something that we haven't been clued into for 1900 years: Because it's really been significantly powerful, in my life as a as a pastor and as a follower of Jesus, to recognize that 70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Christians lost almost all – not quite, but almost all – of our connection to Hebrew theology, Hebrew practice and the context of Jesus' first-century ministry.

And what that means is that we're taking the text and we're just like making it up as we go along, trying to figure out what it means. I mean, we just as well take a Ouija board thing and use it on the Scripture and figure that we got the answer because we all came up with it together!

But then we learned from Biblical scholars the significance of the notion of water as an image:

So, you all may remember the pyramids in Egypt, right, these beautiful things? Well, sometimes those are used in the Hebrew scripture, or in the Christian scripture and the Hebrew Scripture as symbols for a bullying, domination, culture – like Rome, like Egypt, like Babylon.

So “the mountains will be brought low and the valleys will be made high.” Well, that's a way of saying: there's not going to be a kingdom of bullies anymore and a kingdom of people who are bullied. We're all just going to be human together.

Well, the term water is used in the same kind of way sometimes, and here it's used the same way:

So, the people of Israel were in Babylon, and they were told a creation story. The creation story basically said, there was this chaos monster named *Tiamat*, and the gods got into a big fight with their mom. And they cut her in half, and they made the Earth out of her, but she needed lots of care, her dead body did, so we made human beings, the gods did, to tend the fields and to be slaves. So, what that story was telling the people of Israel was that *their purpose in life was to be slaves*.

And so a theologian and storyteller sat down by the fire one night, and she began to tell a *different* story:

She said in the beginning, the Earth was void and there was this deep, *Tehom*, that covered everything, and the wind blew over the *Tehom* – this great, watery, vast stretch – and God made light and life in the middle of it. And God made human beings in God's image to tend and care for the Earth and for each other.

And that word *Tehom* is the same word in Hebrew as *Tiamat* – it's related to the *Tiamat* word in Babylonian language.

And so, when Jesus says to them, “You're going to fish for people,” he means two things. Or, it's two ways of saying the same thing:

You're going to help take people out of a bullying culture, in which we can only see each other as competitors for scarce resources, in which we have to deny each other's fundamental humanity, and worth, and value, and dignity; where we have to deny our connection to each other, because we're competing in a bullying system, and I've got to help my family survive, so I don't care what happens to yours.

And what Jesus says, is that his disciples are going to help pull people out of that.

Because what is fishing, but removing a fish from water? What is "fishing for people" in the Roman Empire, but taking them out of the chaotic waters of a bullying culture?

And reminding people of the story of the creation that says that all people are made in God's image and they're beautiful, and we're valuable, and we're in this together. It is our job, it is our privilege, to care for each other and to guard each other and to support each other.

So, Jesus says "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." There is something new that is happening. We're going to get people out of this yucky water, which is like killing us, and we're killing each other. Because there is **another way to live**, called the Kingdom of Heaven, called the Kingdom of God, in which we are invited to the true birthright of our own humanity, and the true inheritance of our human community. We're invited to see each other as God's holy and beloved ones. We're invited to see each other across lines of culture and religion and socio-economic situation and racial characteristics as **human beings**.

And yes, it's true. Human beings do compete. We don't only compete. We also cooperate. I mean, I remember playing basketball as a kid, it was one of the few things that my family had money to do. And when you played a game with other kids, you had to compete, but you also had to cooperate to play the game. So sometimes you had to call a foul because somebody was harming the game by over-competing with you. Or maybe you did it to them.

The reality is, human beings compete *and* cooperate. But we compete and cooperate, Jesus says, inside of God's vision for how we can live with each other, in such a way that even when we're competing, we recognize the human dignity and the needs of the other.

In other words, it's not okay to take all of the poker chips, it's not okay to win every game no matter what. Because the society that does that, is a society that is doomed to fail, that is doomed to fall and take a lot of people with it.

And so the issue that Jesus was trying to address wasn't "the start of a new religion because his fellow Jewish people had messed it up."

It wasn't because "God couldn't forgive unless God kills Jesus on the cross." (Even though Jesus would end up there.)

The issue is that God was seeing human beings could construct a society that was not working, and that was degrading each other, they were harming each other, they were only bullying and competing with each other.

John the Baptizer saw the same thing.

He said, if someone is hungry, what do you do? Give them some of your extra food.

If someone is, is naked, what do you do? You give them an extra cloak.

If someone is homeless, what do you do? Well, you give them a place to sleep.

And then the soldier said, well, what do we do? And he said, well, be satisfied with your pay and don't extort people, don't set people up and then steal money from them.

The tax collector said, what do we do? Take only the money that you're supposed to take.

And he began in those kinds of invitations, to help people recognize that the Kingdom of God is not just some strange thing that's far, far away, that's going to come and one day magically "happen." But the Kingdom of God **is a way that you and I can live right now.**

But I want to say, as a pastor of 32 years, that I don't think I've always seen it that way. And I don't think I certainly have always lived that way. But I trust that when Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, Follow me and I will make you fish for people; I will make you fish other people out of a bullying culture that thinks it's all about me and all about mine," ... that Jesus can fish *me* out of it too.

Because I want to confess that I still live in that bullying culture that I was born into. I know many of us do. Our American culture is beautiful in lots of different ways, but there's still a lot of bullying. It's built into all kinds of things. People's humanity is not often recognized. And we are often silent when their humanity's denied.

But I trust that the Kingdom of God is coming.

You know, Luther said that the Kingdom of God, you don't have to pray for it to come, because it's going to come of its own accord; what we pray is that the Kingdom of God may come among us.

I can only now pray, after all these years, that the Kingdom of God will come among us. And that I, by the grace of God, like you, will be fished out of the water of domination and bullying into the water of God's Kingdom, in which we recognize not only our own human dignity, but that of all people.

May it be so.