

January 26, 2020

Matthew 4:12-23

There are three distinct parts to this morning's Gospel reading. The first places the start of Jesus' ministry in historical context. Jesus had been hanging out in Judea, listening to John the Baptist preach and getting baptized himself. When Jesus hears that John has been arrested, he moves north. Almost back home, but instead of Nazareth he heads to the lakeside town of Capernaum.

Matthew tells us Jesus does this to complete the words of Isaiah found in the ninth chapter of Isaiah's writings. Matthew fairly accurately quotes Isaiah, who said that even Galilee, an area known as a crossroad between empires, would see the sun of liberation rise in their dark country and even harder lives. It is in this backwater, overrun-by-empires country that the darkness of Isaiah's time is residing once again.

Jesus starts his ministry here, preaching a continuation or a deepening of John's message: "Change your life. God's reign is here." It is clear that Matthew sees Jesus' ministry as one of liberation, as a bringing of light to a people in deep darkness.

As much as our world view has changed; as much as our understanding of how the world works has changed, it never ceases to amaze me how little human nature has changed. Isaiah's words had deep meaning for his society and for Matthew and Jesus' followers 500 years after he preached and wrote them. And here we are today, 2,500 years after Isaiah was written and we still find ourselves in a land of deep darkness or at least that is how it often feels. And, we are still, desperately in need of changing our lives.

Where, or how, do we begin? The answer to that is in the second part of today's Gospel lesson: We are called to follow

Jesus. Whether we are at work, as the first disciples were, or out shopping, we must always be vigilant, on the lookout for Jesus. He comes to us still, asking us, encouraging us to "fish for people". What fishing for people looks like is to be found in the third part of today's reading, but every fisherman and woman can tell you the most important thing about fishing, if you are interested in catching one, is not to scare the fish.

The Gospel lesson fits well as we welcome new members into our midst, but lest we forget it is important to note for most of those joining this is not their first rodeo. They have been part of a church before they came here. They have all been baptized. They had dropped their nets and chosen to follow Jesus long before they got here. So the call to follow Jesus in this passage is more of a reminder to us all, than something new.

Jesus is our example for how we are to fish for people. Matthew tells us that he went all around the neighborhood meeting with people and telling them "the truth of God." It was this truth that brought light and life into the darkness and hard times the people of Galilee were living in under the occupation of the Roman empire.

Matthew tells us Jesus' main theme was God's reign and the fact that they were living under God's government right now. The hard fact was that they were living under Roman rule, but Jesus was saying that Rome was not the highest authority. God was, is, and always will be. It becomes one's choice as to who is allowed to rule over one's life.

There is a German song that explains how this is possible. It is titled "Die Gedanken sind frei" – Thoughts are free. The ruling powers of this world can tell you what to do, but they cannot tell you what to think or believe. Jesus offered freeing thoughts to people caught up in a system that kept them

subservient, imprisoned, cast out, feeling powerless. He did this by teaching and living God's truth, which is that God is love. Those cast out, those rejected, those imprisoned, those impoverished, all were told by Jesus they too were loved and lovable; they too were valued by God.

For those imprisoned by rejection, by being outside the power structure, we know the power of this message. It founded the church. Everywhere since the Bible was translated into the vernacular and read by people under repressive regimes, it has stirred up revolt, such as the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Jesus' message is a freeing, liberating message of and by love.

But here is the rub for us, new members, long members, and all those here seeking to understand and follow the truth of God in Jesus: We are part of the power structure, not outcasts. This does not mean we are not loved or lovable. It means we will find it difficult to live "under God's government."

For those on the outside, living under God's government allows them to throw off the shackles, the chains that bind them. It allows light to shine into the darkness of their lives that can be so depressing.

For us on the inside of the power structure God's government asks us to throw off our second coat so that someone with no coat can be warm. Instead of that takeout food that you take home, give it to someone on the street with no home and no dinner.

Even harder God's government asks you to work on prison reform in order to free the prisoners; work on affordable housing in order to house the homeless; work on raising the minimum wage so that those who do work can afford to put food on the table and raise a family.

Before you feel too put upon or think I am being too political, there is a final step yet to be mentioned in this membership in the community of Christ under God's government. It is back in the second part of Matthew's story. We are not called to do to live under God's government alone. In fact, it cannot be done alone. If it could, Jesus would never have needed Peter and his brother or John and his brother.

True, individually, we choose to live under God's government, but we can only carry out this decision in community, which is what membership in Amicable Church is all about. We learn and practice and are supported in our practice by other faithful travelers on the journey with us here at Amicable. This is how we go about living as the body of Christ in the world; it is how we continue the work of Jesus, which, in addition to teaching God's truth, was also about healing people of their diseases – body, mind, and spirit – and the bad effects of their lives. This is what we do here with and for each other in community and what we do as we seek to shine a beacon light of unconditional welcome and love out into the larger community.

Each and every day Jesus is calling us to live under God's government; to set our moral compass by God's love; to break the chains of darkness and fear that keep us separate from others.

When we do this then "people sitting out their lives in the dark" will see the light of hope and those "sitting in that dark, dark country of death" will see the freeing, life-giving love of God shine forth.

May God give us the strength, courage, and community we will need to live under God's government. Amen.