

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he **withdrew to Galilee**. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**"

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for **they were fishermen**. ¹⁹And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you **fish for people.**" ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

"Jesus' Winning Strategy?"

You know, we pastors are well-aware of our ultimate responsibility to build up the church, to make it succeed, make it grow, but sometimes when we

look at the example Jesus set we're left scratching our heads and asking Jesus, "Is this the way you want us to do it?" So often, Jesus does things in ways that seem to us irrational, foolish, and unlikely to succeed. Look at today's text for example: After John the Baptist is arrested by King Herod Antipater, Jesus goes to Galilee, a region where the same King Herod had jurisdiction. **And** Jesus starts proclaiming the same message that John was proclaiming: "Repent, for the kingdom of *God* (not the kingdom of Herod) is at hand." **And** Jesus heads to this fishing town called Capernaum and recruits a few fishermen to assist him in his ministry. So is Jesus really expecting to succeed? If my cousin gets stung by a hornet while shaking a branch on a tree, what's going to happen if I start shaking the very same branch? And if I want people to join my movement, why would I employ fishermen, with no legal credentials, no marketing skills, to get my message out? Is Jesus really setting a good example for us on how to evangelize?

The answer, of course, is "Yes!" Emphatically yes. The way Jesus goes about his ministry is anything but safe - by our assessment Jesus takes risks that seem unreasonable, reckless, even suicidal. Consequently the Church often takes a less risky approach to mission; we don't go where we're not welcomed. We don't proclaim messages that may offend some people. And we recruit professionals to build our ministry. The result is that we are safe and comfortable and inoffensive and well-respected and **practically irrelevant to those around us**. Jesus and his disciples, on the other hand, were often in danger making proclamations that landed them in jail and offending the sensibilities of many a self-righteous person. They were a hodge-podge of misfits - fishermen, tax collectors, lepers, and women - on a suicide mission. Yet in spite of all that seemed to be working against them, they succeeded. How could that happen?

First of all, let's look at **what was proclaimed**: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Now I'll be the first to admit that in New York a message put in such a blunt way does not get much mileage these days. Images of a bearded prophet on a milk crate come to mind, a guy ignored by a crowd at best, more likely ridiculed, and hardly ever taken seriously. Clearly John and Jesus had far more success with this message for various reasons. Unlike us, the Jews in first century Palestine were living under authoritarian rule, much like the people of North Korea are today. Imagine Kenneth Bae, an American evangelist, declaring "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is upon you," on the streets of Pyongyang. He would be arrested immediately because the rulers would consider him a threat to their own authority, and such a message would likely prompt many people to look at their circumstances and no longer recognize the dictator as having ultimate authority over them. When you're living on the edges and the government under which you live is more your enemy than your friend, and someone declares a message calling

for radical change in yourself and a change in the government that exercises authority over you, you welcome that invitation. In North Korea the call to repent might sink into the hearts of soldiers and police who are charged with carrying out the orders of the corrupted, self-serving rulers. Declaring that the kingdom of heaven is at hand would be welcomed by most of the common folks who would welcome any other kingdom than the one that is currently oppressing them. This is how Jesus' audience would have understood it – a call to dissociate itself from evil because a new order had arrived.

But when you live in a more-or-less free society where we enjoy some semblance of justice, the kingdom of God takes on a much different meaning much different from what its meaning was in Jesus' day. In the context of a call to repent, we think of the kingdom of heaven as a new reality that follows a cosmic cataclysm. The kingdom of heaven implies God's judgment, and we don't relish the thought of that. Because we don't anticipate a cosmic cataclysm, and we think of ourselves as decent people, generally speaking, we don't take the call to repent very seriously either.

We should ask ourselves if there is another phrase that would better communicate to a modern American audience what "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near" meant to Jesus' audience. I think we do this best when we publically protest social injustice, when we tell people to recognize evil and urge them to dissociate from that evil. "Do not succumb to the temptation of pornography because it degrades women and encourages human slavery." "Free yourself from your addiction to alcohol because it limits your potential and ultimately diminishes your self-image." In the workplace you may declare to your fellow workers, "Stop making ethnic slurs; you're stereotyping and sounding self-righteous." You see how "repent" is implied in all of these expressions; it's just put into more specific terms – you're *specifying* what behavior needs to change. And as far as "why" the behavior needs to change, you're giving specific answers as well that all are in essence saying that "the kingdom of heaven has come near." You are describing what that kingdom is about when you say, "women should not be degraded," "You should live to your fullest potential," and "you should treat people with respect." Those are characteristics of the kingdom of heaven, which has come near to wherever you happen to be standing because that kingdom is upon you. You are a kingdom dweller, here and now inasmuch as Christ rules your heart, Christ guides your steps and your words. And as kingdom-dwellers, as Jesus' disciples, we are called to be just as provocative as he was when he declared, "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Furthermore, we need to speak our provocative messages where they need to be heard the most. Jesus went to Galilee, where Herod had attempted to stifle the message that John was declaring. Jesus went there so that Herod would not succeed in stifling it. He didn't go there in spite of the risk; he went there *because of* the risk. Now we can't exactly get up and move our church to South Sudan or North Korea where we're certain to find risks, but we can, here in Tottenville, here in Staten Island, bring God's word to places where it needs to be heard. It's not enough to keep it within these walls; here it is safe, but it doesn't get to those who need to hear it the most and where it might actually get us into trouble. The word of God has gotten a lot of people into trouble, but it's the best kind of trouble to be in.

Finally, you need to recognize that you are qualified to proclaim that word, to call people to repent, to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is near, and to get in trouble for it sometimes. Jesus recruited anyone who was willing to follow and obey him. It didn't matter what your aptitude was. He didn't check your references. He didn't look at your arrest record. This is why the Church has always had the most unlikely leaders, folks who wouldn't stand a chance of getting into a country club, except perhaps to bus the tables.

The amazing truth is that such a ministry succeeds – bringing an offensive message to a dangerous place by way of anyone willing to bring it. It makes sense, though, that it is received, because, quite frankly, it is truth. God calls us all into his kingdom, and it's only natural that people want to go there. We *want* a world where people are treated fairly and with respect. We *want* to live our lives to the fullest which means being the absolute best we can be. And we *want* to live in harmony, unlike Paul's church in Corinth where the people had obviously lost sight of their mission to bring God's word to others and instead got caught up in petty squabbling over who got baptized by who. In a sense, the risks we take as disciples of Christ can serve to keep us from getting sidetracked in petty squabbles; we'll be too busy dealing with those who take offense at our message to be fighting with one another. Yet all the time we will be advancing God's kingdom, drawing more and more people into a new life. Let us follow our Lord into those dangerous places where the good news of his kingdom may meet the strongest resistance but may also reach the ears of those who need to hear it the most.