

“The Time is Now”

Mark 1:14-20

On Sunday, December 14, 24 of our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade confirmands along with several parents, volunteer Karen Hearld, and youth director Laura, made our way to the Redeemer Crisis Center to serve a Christmas dinner, to sort and stock food and clothing, and to learn from those folks making their way to the church by foot or city bus.

We began the afternoon sitting in the sanctuary where Diane, the Crisis Center Director, shared some interesting statistics. With Divinity’s \$2,000 donation, she was able to purchase 5 tons of canned and frozen food from the food bank as well as 400 chickens. One of our confirmands asked where she was going to put 400 chickens thinking they would be alive. She assured us the chickens were already butchered and would be given to the 600 families she was expecting to come through the crisis center during the last two weeks of the year.

Diane thanked us for the 521 pairs of socks we’d brought along and reminded us, they would be given to people trying to survive on \$25 a week in food stamps and who often didn’t know where their next meal was coming from. Diane then divided us into working groups, some to stock the pantry, some to sort clothes, some to wrap Christmas gifts, and some to set the tables and to help prepare for the meal.

I took my spot at the entrance to the basement fellowship room, to hold the people back until the meal was ready to be served. Normally, I sit on the steps outside and visit with the folks, but because it was raining and cold outside, we let them in and the doorway to the basement became my place to strike up a conversation with the first to arrive, an 11 year old who told me he lives above a music store on Pearl and who had walked to the church by himself because his mom was at work. When I asked him about school, he confessed that his teacher sends him to I.S.S. instead of to art class because he doesn't get along with his art teacher. He asked me if I knew what I.S.S. was. I responded knowingly, "in school suspension." He smiled as he was suddenly surrounded by a half dozen other children who had recently arrived. These children all made their way to the church by themselves at 5:30 in the rain.

A tall, African American man who had just arrived by bus from his apartment on 150<sup>th</sup> St., 125 blocks to the west. With his girlfriend, he made his way to a back table where I joined him. When he noticed by collar, Willie began to share his story of growing up in Cleveland, his time in prison, his wayward 27 year-old daughter and two grandchildren, his being baptized twice and turning his life around, and then finally the questions. "Pastor, why do we have all this suffering? I didn't know Adam and Eve. Why do we have to suffer for what they did? But it doesn't matter because I know the end is near. Everyone is of the

world, including my own daughter – fightin, druggin – but Jesus is comin back anyday and I'm ready! I've been baptized twice because I know Christ and I'm not of the world. Pastor, how many times do you think we should be baptized?

I emphatically responded, “Everyday!” Now it was my turn. “We are tempted everyday. You know that. We experience evil and suffering everyday. We need to be baptized everyday so God chooses us again everyday as one of his children. We need forgiveness and new faith everyday!”

Willie's eyes got big and he flashed a 51 year-old toothless grin, holding out his hand to shake mine and saying, “Amen Brother” to which I responded, “Amen Brother!” Then as Willie stood up to go get in line for his dinner, he shook his head, and said, “I just wish God would have gotten rid of Satan once and for all!”

As Willie walked away, I asked myself, “Am I ready?” These people that come by bus and on foot for a meal and two pairs of socks, are they more ready than me? I remember the difficulty of a wealthy man passing through the eye of a needle and the ease with which a poor man can say, “I have nothing holding me here; I'm ready.”

Maybe it's in serving Willie that God reminds me to be ready, for “we know neither the day nor the hour” and Willie truly believes Jesus' return is near. Maybe I should listen to Willie with the toothless grin, the crazy eyes, who knows being released from prison, who knows not where his next meal is coming from, who

knows the Cleveland bus route, who knows a Redeemer meal, who knows 21<sup>st</sup> century poverty, who knows Christ is coming when he so faithfully and emphatically announces, “I’m ready!”

Would it not be Willie who would willingly follow if Jesus came calling?

If the call of the first disciples is any indication, Jesus wasn’t looking for experts in religious discourse, cheerleaders who would be part of an entourage, role models of high moral character and religious piety or techies versed in communication theory and practice. He doesn’t go headhunting at the local synagogue or collect resumes from Jerusalem.

Instead, he goes to the lakeshore reeking with the stink of fish, and begins by inviting some fishermen to be on his team. While the text gives us no indication of the specific roles Jesus was looking for in Simon, Andrew, James and John, we can get a clue at least about the basic character of the disciples he was calling and, indeed, still calls today.

Before we go there, though, we have to remember that any entrepreneurial venture worth its salt *begins with a solid mission statement*. Here it is: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15). The time is now. God is here, change your ways and be believing the good news.

The announcement of the kingdom would have sounded both exciting and

dangerous to those hearing Jesus by the Galilean lake. It was exciting because it meant that God was going to act decisively on Israel's behalf, but dangerous because that meant a challenge to the prevailing Roman authority. In fact, for many first-century Jews, "kingdom of God" was a revolutionary slogan that suggested violent revolt against Roman power. Jesus, however, would use that slogan quite differently. For Jesus, the coming kingdom was a sign that God was going to do something on behalf of all of creation, redeeming God's people from sin, making outsiders to be insiders and decisively defeating evil and death. That was the "good news" that required a response.

A response seems to be what Jesus was looking for as he came to the lakeshore. He was doing his own "fishing" for people when he came upon Simon and Andrew, and invited them to join him in his work. James and John were next, leaving their undoubtedly astounded father by the boats with the hired help as they, too, set out after Jesus. Traditionally, many readers of the gospels assume that these fishermen were poor, destitute individuals with nothing to lose who follow Jesus to try and break the monotony of their everyday lives.

A close reading of Mark reveals quite a different scene. The truth is that these four fishermen were somewhat prosperous. We learn later that Simon and Andrew had a house and an extended family (Mark 1:29-31) and that James and John, along with their father Zebedee, were wealthy enough to be able to hire

additional help for their fishing business. Chances are that with this kind of background these men may have had some education. These weren't desperate drifters with nothing to lose, but well-established businessmen in a culture where prosperity and family were everything. Following Jesus, then, was no small disruption of their lives but a complete change of course. Throwing in with Jesus meant throwing out their security, their reputations and their livelihoods.

Was Jesus looking for a cheerleader, a role model, and expert and a techie?

The political and religious establishment would come to think of him as a radical subversive – an ideological terrorist. But Jesus wasn't looking for a weapons expert, bomb-maker, P.R. person and so on. Rather than looking for four specific role definitions, Jesus wanted people with just one primary qualification for discipleship; a willingness to follow, regardless of cost.

Sure, the disciples would take on different roles within the group as it formed around Jesus. Simon Peter would become the leader, spokesman and conscience of the group, John would be the “beloved” disciple and closest friend of Jesus, Andrew may have been the hospitality coordinator, and so forth. Regardless of his role, however, each disciple shared a common trait: they said “yes” to Jesus’ invitation, gambling their own futures on his vision for a new world.

Mind you, they didn't exactly understand the ramifications at first. Mark is pretty hard on the disciples, who seem to be a bit slow on the uptake at times when

trying to grasp what Jesus was teaching them. The courage that they displayed that day on the lakeshore would dissolve into panic in the Garden of Gethsemane, yet they would be recovered by the resurrection and would move the kingdom message out into the world, a move that would cost most of them their lives.

Imagine Jesus walking into an office building, a factory or a grocery store and tapping a secretary, a welder or a checkout clerk on the shoulder saying, “Follow me.” Imagine the looks on the faces of his coworkers when the employee walks out, leaving the file open, the doors of a new car un-welded and the groceries un-bagged. We have a hard time fathoming that kind of response and would probably chalk it up to some kind of cult-like mind control on the part of the spiritual guru making the call. We like the idea of religious devotion to a cause, but only insofar as it doesn’t get in the way of our “normal” lives.

But we miss that fact that *Jesus is all about disrupting our normal lives.* The announcement of the kingdom was a proclamation that everything was changing. Later, these same disciples would be accused of “turning the world upside down” through their preaching and activity in the name of Jesus (Acts 17:6). Being a disciple means being willing to drop our own agendas for life and get on board with the kingdom agenda of Jesus. Being a disciple means being ready when Jesus comes calling because as Willie warned me at Redeemer back in December – the time is now!

#817 - You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore