



Calvary Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 19, 2023

LENT 4: *"Smashing Alabaster: Church and Empire (Part 2)"*
Pastor Eyde Mabanglo

INTRO TO OUR SCRIPTURE

Last week, I left the congregation wondering if the jet plane ever landed on the aircraft carrier. I wonder if I should always use a "cliff hanger" on Sunday mornings to encourage all the friends of Calvary to return each Sunday. The good news is that the jet did land. I am not aware of any other ending of that story.

Today, we are looking at a passage from Matthew's Gospel again. The message is a part two of Jesus calling the first disciples. What is he calling them to? What are they leaving to follow?

Matthew 4:12-23. I am reading from the New Living Translation.

The Ministry of Jesus Begins

¹²When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he left Judea and returned to Galilee. ¹³He went first to Nazareth, then left there and moved to Capernaum, beside the Sea of Galilee, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴This fulfilled what God said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵"In the land of Zebulun and of Naphtali, beside the sea, beyond the Jordan River, in Galilee where so many Gentiles live, ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. And for those who lived in the land where death casts its shadow, a light has shined."

¹⁷From then on Jesus began to preach, "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

The First Disciples

¹⁸One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. ¹⁹Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” ²⁰And they left their nets at once and followed him.

²¹A little farther up the shore he saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, repairing their nets. And he called them to come, too. ²²They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind.

Crowds Follow Jesus

²³Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness.

There it goes again – that voice. That often quiet, sometimes screaming voice in your head that judges your every move, accusing you and those around you of all sorts of imperfections and generally bringing you down.

It isn't a tangible sound, yet its destructive power should weigh in with mighty decibels. Try to imagine it as a tape that plays constantly in the background of your thoughts. What does your tape play?

SOURCE: <http://www.valueoptions.com/solutions/2010/09-September/story4.htm>

We all have tapes that play in our head...maybe it's our mother's voice...an old lover...a narcissistic bully that you dealt with as a child or maybe just a few days ago. But just as any one of us can be dealing with false messages repeating in our mind, the church—TOO—has some destructive messages that bombard our identity as the body of Christ. As an institution, the church has been formed, reformed, conformed, and maybe even deformed by mixed messages from our church history, faith traditions, and frankly the culture that we have been born and bred within.

I'm calling this water we swim in, this air we breathe, a radio station called Empire FM. Now I think there really is a broadcast entity called Empire FM and I have no idea what kind of news, radio talk shows or music they play. But for this morning, I want us to consider the ways that we have been

conditioned to think about God, the church, and one another through all the varied and confusing broadcast waves from Empire FM.

I think when Jesus begins his ministry that he is trying to stop some of the messages of the empire. As he reaches out to the two sets of brothers, fishing in the Galilean waters, he is asking them to change their allegiances, their priorities, and to dial in Truth (instead of Empire FM) which is their sacred calling to gather and join Jesus in gathering more still.

Jesus preaches John's sermon
Repent/The Kingdom is Near—
The summons is about calling, not about coercion
It is about fellowship, not fear
We don't scare people into faith...fear-based evangelism smells like empire
The word repent can make us cringe...we think it is itself a message of condemnation
Repent is a returning to God...a returning to home...a returning to our deepest longing
a returning to the person we were created to be...
a returning to an eternal truth that exists between us, beyond us

Repent/The kingdom is Near AND Near is here!

Jesus has traveled to be in this spot but make no mistake the kin-dom of God is always in the proximity of Christ...Jesus travels a lot in Scripture. Every location is holy ground. Every place is sacred space. And in today's passage, Jesus has traveled to be in the center of the empire.

And the center of empire is on the seashore to meet
Two sets of fishing brothers
Two sets of government contractors,
expected to reach a quota of fish to benefit the empire.

Jesus summons them not just to follow, but to repent or realign their life with truth
When they drop their nets, they drop their allegiance to empire and their contracts

They commit to following the truth that created them, calls them, and finds their worth not just in their calloused bodies, but as men with heart and soul, mind and agency.

So following Jesus is an intentional decision to disrupt empire.

Empires, like Rome, need bodies to fish, to work, to labor in order to expand, exploit, and to colonize the world.

Empire FM tells us that people are just bodies—female bodies, white or black bodies, native or immigrant bodies, short/tall, fat/skinny, perfect/deformed AND we judge, dismiss, ignore, or otherwise evaluate the worth of these bodies—rarely considering them as minds or spirits or souls or siblings or person of value and agency.

This is a part of our church history...our nation's history...our local history.

The Good News is that Jesus calls disciples/followers to value souls, gather souls as whole persons of valuable worth to demonstrate a different kind of governance, kingdom or rule that is eternally built upon justice and mercy. He did then. He does now.

If we would see every body as soul, every body as mind—value every person as whole, then we can turn down Empire FM and hear the still voice of God ask us to not only sing, but be the lyrics of God's love song in this world.

Jesus delivers John's sermon—repent/return to justice and mercy because eternal love is near...I AM is HERE.

Jesus delivers Isaiah's prophetic message—I will lift the oppressive, stifling yoke from the bodies of my people—for they are not just stolen laborers—they are my beloved children, they have worth, they are mind, body, and spirit—they ALL are to be my agents of transformation for this world.

To see people as whole people is not just a lesson in being body positive, it is a lesson in body transformative. To accept our own bodies, minds and spirits as God-given, God-valued, and God-ordained is to accept every body as such. When God says this is my child whom I am well-pleased, we see God embodying our humanity in Christ. When we hear God say that we, too, bring joy—then we can turn off the repeating tapes of judgement

and oppression...we can tune our minds and hearts away from Empire FM to a message of justice and mercy.

Dear church, we have been listening to the airwaves of empire FM—a music and talk radio station that has convinced us that stolen land, stolen labor, and stolen lives is somehow ordained by God...Empire FM has made us assume that we are superior, smarter, chosen, and elite...Let us not make peace with power, but let us make peace with truth.

The cost of not confronting Empire in the way we see and treat our neighbor is too great. We risk losing our identity as Christ's body if we stop calling out power, if we don't turn off the rhetoric of Empire FM, if we stop seeing every body as having intrinsic worth. For if we keep listening to that Empire station, we will completely contradict our calling, and abandon the summons of Christ.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus refers not to the Kingdom of God, but to the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew is emphasizing our agency, the human agency that each of us must contribute to this kingdom work. Jesus' summons to the fisherman is a calling to participate in the calling of others...Jesus' invitation to the brothers is a gathering of those who will become the gathering ones.

Rome coerces. Jesus calls.

Coercion and power wielding are top hits from Empire FM.

The new kin-dom, the near kingdom, inspires us to follow, to participate.

We gather souls by calling—by inviting all bodies to taste and see God is good.

Not to follow or die...but to know the one who loves us.

This summons, this invitation, this calling, this movement

Was passed from John to Jesus

Then from Jesus to his followers—the brothers, the fishers, the gatherers

Then from this community in Matthew to us

And, today, from us to gathering and inspiring others to also become gatherers

What called you here today?
Empire FM or the Spirit of Christ?

What compels you to follow?

An assumed elitism—because we're educated or come from good stock or
an inerrant inclusion—based on the ancient wisdom of our creator and
sustainer.

If you are compelled to gather, follow, and be sent into the world today--

Then prayerfully consider how you might begin to tune out Empire FM

(a tape that says it is more important to have power over...)

and listen instead to the Spirit of Christ calling you still...

to drop the nets of empire and follow the gathering one (to practice a
power with...)

to value and gather people as not just bodies—but as bodies, minds, and
spirits—

so that we might all become agents of justice and mercy and love and truth.

May it be so. May it be so.

