

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany – January 22, 2017

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“A Different Way”

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Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23; 3 Epiphany A

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Yesterday was a day of marches, of protests and demonstrations. Not just in these United States but in nations all over the world. Over two million people were reported to be marching: in response to the inauguration of the new president of these United States, or for women's rights, or for better working conditions, or to protect the environment, or to prevent abortion, or for equal treatment for all. Over two million people in the world's streets, from Antarctica to Russia to cities all over the USA...

Thus far this morning, Jesus has managed to assemble four. Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Hardly a rousing start, wouldn't you say? But it is a start. Especially when you consider what Jesus is promoting. It isn't protest, or individual rights, or even the promise of a better life. “Repent,” is all he is saying, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repent. Change your direction. Change your mind. Change your way of thinking. Do things differently. And as best I can tell, Jesus is asking this of everyone. Apparently there is no particular political position he espouses, no paragon of particular virtue to whom he would point to say,

“Be more like him” or “Be like her.” Rather his message is universal... Hey! Everybody! We need to repent and do things differently.

And why wouldn't he ask that things be different? Things aren't so great. His cousin, John, is in jail. King Herod Antipas has seen to that. No more voice crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” And Jesus has removed himself from Jerusalem to Galilee far to the north. Jerusalem is becoming increasingly unsafe. The Roman stranglehold on the Jews grows ever stronger, and the response of the people is becoming increasingly confrontational, even violent. The people who speak out for justice are suppressed. The protests have moved into the streets. The king is corrupt; the governor no better. The people are so heavily taxed to support the Roman Empire that they can hardly live: taxes on income, roads, sales, homes, meat, salt, water, and upkeep for the Temple. I can only imagine that Jesus took a look around and realized that there was no way this world could continue without everything crashing down in disaster. Something was missing. Another way must come to pass.

*Repent! Change your direction. Change your way of thinking. Do things differently. Don't you understand that the kingdom of heaven has come near?*

I've often wondered what Jesus means when he calls us to repent. What would that look like... to take a new direction, as Jesus implored his people? Honestly, I do not believe that Jesus was seeking to manipulate the governmental policies of his day. He was no politician seeking office or power. He served on no leadership council, and he asked no favor of any king or governor. But he did try to make a real change. He knew what it would look like for this people to repent, what it would take to change the world for the better. And with a handful, just a handful of ordinary followers that started with four fishermen, he marched to offer the world the only solution that might, in fact, make some real difference.

- *You've long thought, says Jesus, that the lowly and the meek are unfortunate and of little account. Not so. To them belongs the kingdom of heaven and the earth as well.*
- *You've long thought that the merciful are unrealistic in this hard world. Think again. They are the ones who know mercy.*
- *You've long believed that peacemakers must be dreamers. Yet it is they who are the children of God.*
- *"You've long heard, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (Or might I paraphrase here to illumine our present day, "You shall love the one with whom you agree and detest everyone else.") Not so. Jesus says, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*
- *"In everything... do to others as you would have them do to you."*

And I look around and I listen to the noise of this anxious and struggling world, and I wonder... Just where have these simple, yet profoundly powerful, axioms gone?... at least within the community that claims to follow Christ. I bet it feels today something akin to the way it felt in Jesus' time. We can't sustain this stress. It's time to repent. To look for the kingdom of heaven in our midst. To do things differently. And the different part that I believe Jesus asked of us is love. Sure, stand up for what is right. Do what you believe in. But do it like Jesus did... with humility and love.

Now I imagine that, for saying that, I stand to receive the same criticism that wishful thinkers and "pollyannas" over the centuries have often received: That love is an unrealistic, ineffective, and insipid illusion in the face of the harsh realities of life. There is no love in politics... no love in economics or diplomacy or business. There is no love between enemies. And with all of that... I would agree.

Yet isn't that the point of Jesus' seemingly inadequate request? Repent? Jesus asks us to take a new direction. He asks us to change our minds and do things differently. He asks us to *put* the love in politics and economics and diplomacy and business. You know, we cannot defeat every enemy that will ever assail us. We cannot force every adversary to see that our way is the only way. We cannot overcome the emperor by the sheer force of our personal righteousness, nor can we

remove all the suffering in this world. But we can repent. We can try to do things differently. We can make love our mark. We can try to love our enemies. We can stand up to our adversaries with honor and respect, though they may not return the same. We can express compassion in our work, our families, our neighborhoods. We can love those that society does not love. *That* would be different.

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You know... those four were only the first. I'm talking about the four fishermen that Jesus called to follow him in his mission to bring more people into the community of love. You all know that things didn't stop there. An earnest movement was just beginning, a march that has continued through time and through the streets and alleys and schools and churches and barracks and battlefields and cathedrals and markets and factories and prisons and... you name it. It's a movement of untold millions upon millions. It's a movement that we can claim or reclaim --- now--- in our lives and our times--- Because it's a movement that first claims us, that speaks to us. Will you hear the voice?

“Follow me.” Step out. Step out in love. Together we will look for others with whom to share the good news of the kingdom of heaven.