

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church
Lake Worth, Florida

Eve of the Third Sunday after Epiphany (January 26, 2008)

Canon Richard T. Nolan

“RADICAL BUT QUITE DOABLE”

[a lecture-homily]

Immediately?

Even as a child I had little respect for the apparently radical message from tonight's reading. *“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”* Are you and I supposed to do the same? It is indeed extreme to believe that individuals would actually leave their families and places of business to follow a wandering teacher *immediately*.

Unless biblical literalists have found a way to wiggle their way out of this apparent demand for immediacy, they must carry quite a burden of guilt, because they do not abandon family and employment on the spur of the moment to “fish for people.” To do so would be irresponsible.

The Context

Before we dismiss the command to follow Jesus immediately, we need to ask about its context. The overall theme of the entire passage read from Matthew is that Jesus was launching his ministry with a call for all the faithful to turn their lives around. Repentance was essential, because the kingdom of God was breaking in on humanity through his ministry. He called others, initially four fishermen, to follow him and join in the calling of people from their ordinary, conventional lives to prepare for the coming of God's kingdom. In carrying through that mission, he taught, he preached, and he healed.

Jesus was not preaching just about religion. He was not declaring that the dawning of God's Kingdom meant only a turnaround in religious beliefs and practices. In the life of the Jewish people there was no separate compartment or activity called “religion.” There was no separation of “church and state” as you and I experience it. In fact, there was not even a word “religion” in biblical Hebrew. Rather, life in its entirety was to be lived within the covenant (the relational pact) between the Jewish people and God, and concurrently among the people, person to person. The fullness of life *included* prayer, worship, and education in their beliefs and practices.

Emergence of Inauthentic Context and Desire for Reform

Regrettably, genuine covenant living had been replaced by individual commitments, not to God and to each other, but to superficial priorities that bred faithlessness, lots of regulations, and all sorts of injustices. Rather than living in a covenant community, they had succumbed to an inauthentic Judaism and to foreign political rule. Many people were hungry for a change, an arrival of God's purposes of mutual love and justice. There was hope for a messiah who would rid the people of foreign rule and a tarnished faith. There was an ongoing sense of urgency for a holistic revolution. (This sounds a lot like today!)

The Bible as Authoritative, but Non-literal

Those of us who respect and honor the Bible as authoritative (in company with tradition and reason) can be informed by expert commentators who guide us with their learned understandings. With regard to Matthew's account of the first disciples following Jesus “immediately,” we learn: *“The calling of the disciples is, I suspect, a telescoped account of what may have taken days or weeks. When Jesus calls to Andrew and Peter and the sons of Zebedee, ‘follow me,’ was this a ‘call to decision’ after a period of mutual prayer and conversation? In any event, Jesus’ first followers leave their familiar occupations to follow Jesus into a land of unexpected challenges and adventures. Perhaps a gentle process of divine luring through prayer and conversation led them to the ‘immediate’ decision to say ‘yes’ to a new vocation and way of life.”* [Bruce Epperly is Professor of Practical Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary and co-pastor of Disciples United Community Church in Lancaster, PA.] **That certainly makes sense to me! Not so radical or irresponsible after all!**

Kingdom of God Still In the Works

Today, these many centuries after Jesus' ministry and ascension, the establishment of the Kingdom of God is still in the works. As lived and taught by the Risen Lord and Christ, the Kingdom was brought nearer during his day, in that we have sufficient "portraits" of him and his ministry. His disciples can grasp God's intentions for humanity better than before he came. None of this is intuitive; it is learned and experienced through particular historical events (however embellished) and through faithful corporate worship, prayer, study, and life within a community of faith; God's purposes for humanity are absorbed and integrated to form one's heartfelt worldview. As a result, his faithful disciples recognize the multitude of needs for a cultural realignment with God's will of love and justice in every aspect of life – including our religious associations.

Americans Are Searching Inwardly

But what is it that contemporary Americans are looking for? Earlier this month's *USA TODAY* reported that more Americans' spiritual growth is nurtured within. With no surprises we learn that people are searching for meaning, for quietude, with an efficient use of their time – which usually means with minimal effort – by turning inward. This can mean dozens of practices that have been around for centuries, most in isolation. An Episcopal priest on the Yale Divinity faculty cautions, though, that spiritual inwardness needs to be connected with community: "When left to our own devices, human beings can come up with unlimited delusions," he says. "We need somewhere we can go to test our own reality." Whatever one might experience inwardly, one doesn't discover Jesus Christ; one doesn't find the God who is made known in pivotal historical events, and one is unlikely to find authentic moral wisdom within. Introspection, however profound or esoteric, is incapable of discerning the arena and activity of the biblical God.

Among many searchers, an alternative or supplementary preference for "religious" nurture is feel-good entertainment as worship, the content as relatively minor.

Flawed Religious Education Needs Fixing

For many centuries the Church's efforts in the very basics of religious education have not been successful. Arid memorization of data has been inadequate and alienating; purely emotional focal points have been insufficient. Religious education has failed to nurture in heart and mind:

- (1) who God is and what God has done pivotally in history;
- (2) what God's wondrous, created reality is
 - and the contributions of scientific methods to understand its complexities;
- (3) what human nature and destiny are
 - including each faithful person's primary identity as a unique child of God; and
- (4) the basic qualities of mutual love and justice as applied to all areas of human lives
 - and the vigorous support of agencies that are genuinely enabling and not mere band-aids.

This type of religious education requires "*a gentle process of divine luring through prayer and conversation leading us to the 'immediate' decision to say 'yes' to a new vocation and way of life*" (adapted from Epperly as quoted above)

With its myths, legends, and interpreted history, the Bible is a witness to God's relations with humanity during a portion of human history. Consequently, religious education should look to Scripture as the primary source for comprehending major themes of Christian religious knowledge, of conveying the revelation of God's will of love and justice. The ultimate value that is key for biblical religion is *agape*, a unique form of love, the quality of mutual concern between persons that includes God. Nurture in this kind of love is a significant component of education for Christian living.

Bishop Robinson's Wisdom

Today's Churches seem as far away from the Word of God as was the Jewish community at the time of Christ. At times, one might ask, why bother?

From *The Eye of the Storm* by Bishop V. Gene Robinson, we welcome his encouragement to persevere despite the overwhelming needs for change: "*In the end, I know everything will turn out right. Christians are*

hopeful by nature – not because we have any special confidence in the desire of human beings to do the right thing, but because of our confidence in God to keep prodding, inspiring, and calling us until we do it. The world may be ready for change, but our faith tells us that change is anything but random. God is always working for the coming of the kind of Kingdom in which all are respected, all are valued, all are included. I believe the Holy Spirit is working within the Church and within the culture to bring that full inclusion about, and in the end, God will not be foiled. In the meantime, we need to work with all our might, intellect, dollars - and all our hearts - to bring that new world into existence.”

The bishop’s encouragement is “radical” in the best sense: living toward a recovery of *essentials*. With resolve, rediscovering and reaffirming our roots is doable – step-by-step over many decades, several centuries.

How will you participate?

The Collect

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Gospel

Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles--
the 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.”

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As 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. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus 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.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Richard T. Nolan

Sometimes while delivering a sermon, preachers wish that they had phrased some words just spoken differently. This occurred a few times while preaching “*Radical But Quite Doable*.” Additionally, certain persons in the congregation brought to mind particular obstacles, such that it is unlikely that they could grasp what was being said.

The text presented above is a slightly revised version of what was actually preached. The “lecture” element [*e.g.*, 1, 2, 3, 4] can be tempered, if one wishes, but sermons can be informative as well as moving – though some listeners will always tune out information.

Note: I also recalled that many Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic lay people believe that the only significant Church participation is hearing words of absolution and receiving consecrated eucharistic elements [plus some other ceremonial benefits (*e.g.*, baptisms, marriage)]. Whatever is said in Scripture, in homilies, and in educational activities is superfluous in their eyes.

See <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/world/peasant.htm> .

Furthermore, some self-protecting, wealthy people resent challenges to their lifestyles – and perhaps their greed. For them, many a sermon will fall on deaf ears. Indeed, an insurmountable mismatch between expectations of Services (and sermons) and what is presented might be a constant operating within some folks.

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