

Sermon: Another Word for “Church”
Text: Matthew 4:12-23
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Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

And he said to them, “Follow me . . .

Matthew 4:19

Come back with me, if you would, to 1965. This, surely, was one of the darkest years in recent American history. The country was basically coming apart at the seams.

In August of that year, August 11th to be precise, an African American man driving through the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles was pulled over on suspicion of driving while intoxicated. What should have been a simple roadside arrest quickly metastasized into a mini-apocalypse.

The stop turned violent, with the man left badly beaten by the police. Not surprisingly, this beating was widely perceived by the members of the Watts community who witnessed it to be a clear case of police brutality.

A protest broke out, which almost immediately bloomed into a full scale urban riot. Cars were overturned, their windows smashed. Buildings were looted and burned. The violence eventually spread over an area of fifty square miles. After five days of tumultuous protest, thousands of National Guard troops were called in to quell the violence.

The riots caused some \$40,000,000 in property damage. But much worse by far, thirty-four people died before the violence ended, and over a thousand more were injured, the vast majority of them African Americans.

On August 21st, just five days after the riot finally ended, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., flew here, to Western North Carolina, to deliver the keynote speech at the annual Christian Action Conference at the Montreat Conference Center, sponsored by the Presbyterian Church.

This was a remarkably bold choice for Montreat, not just in light of what had just happened in Los Angeles, but in light of the fact that, at the time, black kids could not swim in Lake Susan--back when white kids could.

It was also the perfect marriage of form and function, as it were, for perhaps more than any Christian leader since Jesus, Dr. King's message was focused on exactly that: not just on action, but specifically *Christian* action.

Here are some excerpts from his speech:

“Whenever a crisis emerges in society, the church has a specific and a great responsibility. It has a real responsibility in the midst of this crisis, because the problems involved are essentially moral issues. The church, being the moral guardian of the community, cannot overlook its moral responsibility at this hour.

“Now, we must admit that all too often, the church has been lax at this point. All too often in the midst of social [unrest], too many Christians have somehow stood still, only to mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities.

“All too often in the midst of racial injustice, too many Christians have remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows . . . This is the real challenge facing the church today. This is the great challenge facing every Christian in these days of racial tension.”

One might argue that this is the great challenge facing the church, and facing every Christian, in every age. Including this one.

On Friday our country inaugurated a new president and so embarked on what will surely be a new age, a new era, in our history. I have said this before from this pulpit but it bears repeating: not everyone who voted for the current president last November voted for hate, or because they're racist.

Perhaps even in a majority of these cases, Americans voted the way they did because, whether some of us like it or not, or understand it or not, these good people were hungry for hope, and, frankly, desperate for change, since the party they voted for last time round failed them in that department.

I also suspect this block of voters includes some of you here today.

If you are one of these folks, let me immediately reaffirm one of the bedrock principles of Presbyterian theology and governance: in every election and in every vote we take, whether it's for a president, or for my Terms of Call, or for the kind of cups we buy for coffee hour, you always have every right to vote your conscience.

And no one, not me, not the Moderator of the PC(USA,) not the Pope, or or the President of the United States, has the right to tell you otherwise.

But I also know that the overwhelming majority of you here today voted another way last November. And now you have grave concerns about the direction our country is likely to take from here, concerns based on what you saw and heard on the campaign trail, and what you've seen and heard since November 8th.

If that's true, here's what I have to say to you. *Take heart. Rise up.*

I know many of you did just that yesterday, taking your concerns to our local streets as part of the Women's March on Washington, which unfolded literally around the world . Robyn and I were happy to join you in that effort.

Now we have to figure out what comes next.

On the night of the election, when things were tipping a different way than almost everyone expected, I texted Beth to say that things were fixin' to get interesting in this country.

She replied, "We're certainly going to have lots of opportunities to be church."

For those of us who identify as Christian folk -- or maybe I need to say, as followers of Jesus, since there's often such a wide a discrepancy between those two things -- that is the crux of the matter, right there. Whichever way we voted last November, our country is going to change, and we are going to have lots of opportunities to be church together.

The bigger question is what does this mean? Racial tension, economic inequality and rapidly growing religious and cultural pluralism have left our country more divided than it has been since, well, 1965. And that doesn't even touch on issues like climate change and education and global security.

Given the scope and the nature of the challenges before us, I suspect we might need to reimagine what it means to be church in the months and years to come.

Once again, I believe Dr. King offers us some insights that can help us with this.

In a speech at Western Michigan University, Dr. King said this, and I'm going to quote him at length because even when he's just giving a speech, he's a far better preacher than I am:

“[Psychologists have] a word that is probably used more than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word ‘maladjusted’ . . . Certainly, we all want to avoid the maladjusted life . . .

“But I say to you, my friends . . . there are certain things in our nation and in the world to which I am proud to be maladjusted . . . I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination.

“I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence.

“In other words, I'm [nearly] convinced now that there is need for a new organization in our world. The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment [that's a mouthful so let me say that again -- The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment], women and men who will be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos. Who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, ‘Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream’ . . .”

“As maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation would not survive half-slave and half-free.

“As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who could say to the men and women of his day, ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you.’

“Through such maladjustment, I believe that we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice. My faith is that somehow this problem will be solved.

“Somehow with this faith, we will be able to . . . bring new life into the dark chambers of pessimism. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation to a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

“This will be a great day. This will be the day when all of God’s children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God, Almighty, we are free at last!’”

Let me repeat that phrase one more time: *The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment*. That, I would submit to you, is a new way to think about church, a new way to think about who we are and what we are called to do.

Were this phrase available to Jesus, he might well have used it to describe that first bunch of disciples. For that is what they were called to do, and who they were called to be: a community of resistance and testimony, called to a different way to live, a different way to love, a different way to be fully human.

What I love the most about the story from Matthew we read for today is that it clearly shows us when this call came to them: right in the middle of their ordinary lives. The same way it comes to all of us: when we’re doing the dishes, or teaching a class, or fixing lunch for our children, or changing the oil in our car, or preparing the agenda for a meeting of the arts council.

The call may have come in the middle of their ordinary lives, but that call also changed their lives. And it only took that one voice to do so.

One person who understands well the truth of this principle is our outgoing president. You may remember this story. I share it here because I truly believe it’s not a partisan story. It is, rather, a story about how one voice changed his life.

Back in 2008, when Barack Obama was still a Senator and still relatively unknown to most Americans, he was out on the campaign trail and he’d hit a wall.

He was tired. It was early in the morning in some remote little town in South Carolina. It was raining and he was soaked and miserable. He walked into the little auditorium where he was scheduled to speak to find maybe a grand total of a maybe dozen people in the room.

He was having a hard time mustering any enthusiasm to speak to these folks when a voice in the back broke in on the proceedings. "Fired up?" the voice shouted. "Fired up!" the other voices in the room instantly replied. "Ready to go?" the one voice intoned. "Ready to go," the room answered.

The voice belonged to a middle-aged African American lady who was dressed in a big hat and who looked she just came from church. Evidently she was famous for this litany. "Fired up?" she repeated. "Fired up!" the people replied. "Ready to go?" she asked. "Ready to go," they answered.

It's not an overstatement to say that one voice changed that one room back on that gloomy day. And as Mr. Obama himself observed, if one voice can change a room, it can change a city, and if it can change a city, it can change a country, and if it can change a country, it can change the world.

At the very least, that one voice can change a life. And, yes, in the Christian tradition the call to a life of faith goes out to individuals. "Fired up, Peter?" "Fired up, Jesus." "Ready to go, James? Ready to follow me? Ready to change the world." "I'm ready, Jesus. Let's get this show on the road."

But in our tradition, it's also true that this voice, this call, goes out to all of us, collectively, because there is power in numbers and because sometimes the work we're called to do is too hard and too big for any one person to do alone.

Indeed, this corporate call is what makes the church the church, and it's a calling that goes out to all of us together, to be a community of people who are maladjusted to the norms and values and standards of this era and this realm, and to embody the norms and values and standards of a different era and a different realm, beyond time and country.

So I'm both going to broaden and change that lady's question slightly, to include all of us, and I'm also going to make it narrower to focus on us, here at the Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church.

I'm going to ask some questions, and I'm hoping the response from you will be, "We will!"

Are you ready? I said, are you ready? Are you fired up? Okay, then....

When Jesus calls us to come and follow him, who will answer that call?

When Jesus calls us to love not just our neighbors but even our enemies, who will answer that call?

When Jesus calls us to meet hate with love, and sorrow with compassion, who will answer that call?

When Jesus calls us to meet fear with faith, and despair with hope, who will answer that call?

When Jesus calls us to make peace and to do justice, who will answer that call?

When Jesus calls us to pray and work that God's will might be done and God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven, who will answer that call?

Okay, then. Let's get this show on the road!