



*Rev. Chris Taylor - 01.26.2020*

*"Stepping Forward"*

*Isaiah 9:1-4 and Matthew 4:12-23*

This morning we are going to be ordaining and installing our newest class of Elders and Deacons. These are the people who will be leading the ministries of the church for the next three years. In the Presbyterian Church we don't have lifetime elders and deacons appointed by the pastor. In fact, it is not the pastors who run the church at all. No, every year one third of our leadership is elected by the congregation, and with the two previous classes these are the leaders who govern the church.

Where do they look for guidance? For us, Christ is head of the Church and so we look first and foremost to him and to his will. We find the clearest expression of that will in Scripture. When we turn there, certain passages stand out. There are, for example, the two "greats" of Jesus teaching: the great commandment and the great commission. When Jesus was asked what commandment is the greatest of all, he responded (Matthew 22:37-40):

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Love God! Love others! You can't get much clearer than that. Love should be our guide in virtually everything we do. And then there is the Great Commission which we find at the very end of Matthew's Gospel (28:18-20): These are Jesus' final words to his disciples following his resurrection:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

If you want to know Jesus' will for the Church, you can't get much clearer than these two "greats". Love God. Love others. Share the Gospel. These are our marching orders. This is what the church is to be about. When over a hundred people showed up in Fellowship Hall two weeks ago to pack 20,000 meals for the hungry, this is what they were doing: loving God; loving others; sharing God's love with those in need.

When thirty or forty or fifty volunteers give countless hours to making Harvest Fair happen, that's what they are doing: organizing and selling an extraordinary amount of clothing, books, household items and furniture at great prices and raising all kinds of money for mission along the way. Loving God, loving others, and sharing God's love with those in need.

And now out of Harvest Fair we've seen the birth of Second Harvest: a thrift store that will be opening down in Sharpsburg that is all about building relationships with people in that community and filling a deep need for quality goods at affordable prices. It is members of our congregation who have been the driving force in making this ministry happen. Loving God. Loving others. Sharing God's love with those in need.

Very early in his ministry, Jesus stood before the congregation in his hometown of Nazareth, and he chose a passage from Isaiah to sum up the essence of his ministry (Lk. 4: 18-19).

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Good news for the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed – that's what love looks like in action. It is William Wilberforce fighting against slavery in England's parliament. It is Martin Luther King, Jr., giving his life in the struggle for justice and equality in our own country. People of faith, following the way of Jesus to make a difference in this world.

Here in our text this morning, we find Jesus picking up the message that John the Baptist had proclaimed (Mt. 4:17), "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This word "repent" carries a lot of baggage today. It sounds kind of

harsh to our contemporary ears. We associate it with fear and threat: “Repent or else!”

The Greek, “metanoia”, actually means to change, or turn around. I often think of it in terms of sailing – the need to change direction because there is trouble just ahead. When Bonnie and I were taking our boat from the Chesapeake up to Lake Erie, we went through the Delaware Canal at the top of the Chesapeake Bay and into the Delaware River. That, in turn, took us down into the Delaware Bay. The mouth of the bay, down around Cape May, is filled with shoals – shallow places where the silt has collected and built up over the years.

There was a clear passage around those shoals, but it meant heading south, towards the lower end of the bay – exactly the opposite direction that I wanted to go. So I studied the chart and found what looked like a shortcut through the shoals that would cut some time off the journey.

Bonnie asked me what I was doing. I told her I was going to cut through the shoals. She said she didn’t think that was a very good idea. I tried to reassure her, but as she watched our depth diminish and get dangerously shallow, she became more insistent. But I was at the wheel. I was in charge and I kept going.

We ran aground. And we didn’t just run aground out towards the outer boundaries of the shallows. I had managed to get Heartsong well into the midst of them. Bonnie was not a happy sailor, and the next ten or twenty minutes proved somewhat stressful as we tried to feel our way back out into deeper waters.

Repent. Change directions. The shallow waters are just ahead.

Only Jesus isn’t saying there is some terrible danger just ahead. What he is saying, rather, is that there is this much better life available to us if we will just turn towards it. This isn’t a threat. It’s an invitation. He is saying the Kingdom of God has broken in. It’s right here. All we have to do is change direction in order to find it.

To turn towards the kingdom means turning away from anything that would hold us back, turning away from anything that would keep us from it. That’s the kind of turning Jesus is talking about, and it is with this turn that we find our way into open waters. It is with this turn that we move towards that space where God is fully present and open our lives to the richness and wonder of the Kingdom Jesus came to share.

That, finally, is what the Church – this church – is to be about: changing lives; helping people find the Kingdom of God so they can experience for themselves the transformation that follows. There is only one way to the Kingdom and that way is through Jesus Christ. We aren't a social club. We aren't a civic organization. God didn't create us to be the moral conscience of the world.

No, we are the body of Christ. Our business is to change lives through an encounter with the living Lord. That's the Gospel. That's what love looks like. And when the Church gets that right, there is nothing like it in all the world.