Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“A Good Disciple Is One Who Leaves”* Mark 1:14-20

Today, and for the next two Sundays, I am going to talk about being a missional church. I want us to think again about what being a missional church means. What has it meant in the past for this church? And what does it mean to be a missional church today in our present context? We know our history and how we have been a missional church before. What does it mean—*given who we are today?*

I have taken-up this subject because this is what we—as a church—have committed ourselves to being. And so, I would like us to remember how, more than five years ago, we gathered—with the help of the late Kahu Richard Kamano from the Hawaii Conference, and with Chris Davies, Coordinator for Congregational Assessment, Support and Advancement (CASA), and with several others—we gathered and worked our way through the New Beginnings Church Assessment program.

I was not with you back then. However, I have read the New Beginnings reports. I have read the summaries from the small groups that came together throughout the island. I have read and listened to how we talked, we dreamed, we remembered, and most importantly, we prayed and we listened for God to show us what God wants to bless through us.

Also, for the past two-and-a-half years, I have listened to what we continue to hope for our church and our community. We hope for wholeness, for healthy hearts, minds and bodies. We hope for strong relationships between all people—relationships filled with trust, compassion, and integrity. We hope for peace and justice for all people.

The good news is that we are already participating in several ministries that are focused on these very things. I am not going to name them this morning because, for two-and-a-half years, I *have* been naming them. So, instead of me doing it, I am going turn the tables on you and ask *you* to name them right now…\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you! See? You could have written a lot of this sermon yourselves. So, that is the good news. The better news is that we are also discovering new ways to pursue ministry through partnerships, which will serve children, youth, and *kupuna*. We will do this while making even better use of our beautiful church campus.

But, what else is there for us to do? How else can we be a missional church? What does that term even mean? We have been using the term quite a lot for the past few years—but what does it really mean?

I wanted to address that question by having us hear and reflect on how the first disciples were drawn into mission and ministry. I chose the “calling of the disciples” from the Gospel of Mark because this is the gospel that does not waste time. Matthew and Luke take four and five chapters respectively to get to the calling of the disciples. Like Mark, the Gospel of John gets to it fairly quickly too, but John also takes the time to set Jesus’ story within the vastness of the cosmos.

Mark is the gospel writer who gets right to the point. He records how Jesus’ life and ministry was foreshadowed in Isaiah. He also records the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus’ baptism. He tells the story of how Jesus was made ready for his ministry by his forty days of temptation in the wilderness. Mark does all of this in *thirteen* verses.

Then, in Mark’s telling, fresh from the wilderness, Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been arrested. Without pausing, Jesus repeats the message John had been proclaiming—the call to repentance, but he also tells his listeners: “The kingdom of God has come near….” [v.14]

Mark seems to want to instill in us a sense of urgency that God’s kingdom is not far off. It is here, he tells us. The time of waiting is over. The time for leisurely preparation is over. Jesus is here, time is swiftly moving forward, and so must we.

So, in the passage we heard this morning, and without introductions or overtures of any sort, Jesus sees Simon and Andrew, and then James and John—two sets of brothers.

“Follow me,” he says.

Mark tells us that their response is to leave, *immediately*. All four men leave their nets, their boats, and James and John leave their father. In an instant, everything that sustained their lives—their work and their family—these things are behind them. They have left all to follow a man whose name they do not yet know.

How can this be, we wonder? How can these men just leave?

I believe the answer may lie in where and what our own minds go to when we read of Jesus calling the disciples. Your mind and mine most probably lingers on the things that have been left—the boats, the nets, the *fish*, the homes, the friends and family. You can almost see all of these things scattered, abandoned.

Meanwhile, the new disciples’ attention is fixed on what they are seeing in the man they are following. What James, John, Simon, and Andrew have seen is what every human heart has sought throughout all of history.

In Jesus, they have seen God’s living, breathing, unreserved communion. That is what he is. That is Jesus’ mission in the world. He is to be, and the disciples have seen: everything that feeds and strengthens the human creature *and* the human *spirit*. Jesus has been sent into the world to *feed* the world. This is who was calling to them to follow.

The disciples reached out to that which would feed them more deeply and completely than they had ever known. In leaving all they owned, and everything that had a claim on them, the first disciples stripped-away all of the older conventions and habits of their time and place. Jesus was calling them to a new life. He was calling them to a new way of living, a new life wherein the foundation was going to be God’s love and grace.

For them, in order to receive it they needed to strip-away all that was familiar—the habits of daily life, all of its routine and possessions. They had to leave that behind and the miracle is: they did! They divested themselves of old possessions, expectations, habits and connections to follow Jesus and experience Jesus’ life of self-giving for the sake of the new community God was creating through him.

Indeed, later, Jesus will gather them for a supper—their last supper together. He will do what you have to do with bread in order to share it. He will break it open—just like his body will be broken—and offer it to them. He will bless and pour out a cup of wine—just like the way his blood, his life, will be poured out—and he will invite them all to drink from it. These are the gifts that will nourish them as they leave behind the world they have known, and go on to continue his work of creating a new relationship with God.

One of the most startling and amazing things about the new life of the disciples is that, in stripping-away all of the old mainstays of their life, and despite Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke, they were not only called to welcome the stranger and the outcast, they were now being called out into the world to *be* the stranger and the outcast seeking welcome.

We can assume that the humility it took to live that life grew in them new capacities to heal whatever they found that was causing brokenness in and among God’s beloved people. It grew in them a new appreciation for mutual respect, for the ability to listen more than they talked, and a new capacity for new customs and new, foreign ideas and situations.

….Well, here we are, two-thousand years later. What has all of this talk about “stripping-away” the past and all of its habits and conventions have to do with us?

In their book, *Weird Church,* Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon reference the story in chapter ten of the Gospel of Luke where Jesus sends out seventy disciples to minister, and they make the observation that “the seventy were put in a humble position of powerlessness. They were to be solely dependent on people they have not yet met.” [p. 19]

When they could trust God’s spirit, when they could trust in the message of love and grace they were given to share, when they could go and find the people who were hungry for these good things, that was when they also found the places where they were welcomed, that was when they were able to form new friends and deep relationships.

What is more, in doing all of this, the seventy were able to grow in love and faith *with* the new friends they had found, the new disciples they were making.

Estock and Nixon put it this way: *almost as an afterthought, but with deliberate emphasis Jesus says, “Before you leave, share with them that together you have witnessed the kingdom of God. It was an invitation to wake up to the ultimate truth of existence: The realm of God is within, right here, right now.* [p. 19]

This is what Jesus has been saying all along—even this morning in the passage we heard: “The kingdom of God has come near.”

And so it has, and is. And in order to receive it, we must do what others before us have done: we must leave behind a lot of what we know and have come to depend on.

Specifically, we will leave behind the way in which the church has enjoyed a place of elevated status, prestige, and privilege. We will have to leave behind the old model of church where people come to us because it is expected—like sending the children to school or paying taxes. In the world we live in, people no longer come to church because it is the expected thing to do. In the world we live in, we are strangers.

This means, we must recognize this as we seek new friends and partnerships in the community. We must turn to the world with humility and a deep desire that others may come to know the Christ we know, and the Spirit that lives in our hearts and lives—the Spirit that feeds us more deeply than we could ever conceive of or imagine.

This is what has come near. This means that the message of good news is still ours to carry and to share, and because of that we can have hope for our future. We can rejoice in what is to come—the lives that will be transformed (some of which will be our own!), new relationships, new friends, new life. We can, with a renewed spirit of courage, confidence and expectation, we too can be the Good Disciples—the ones who leave. Thanks be to God. Amen.