

The Turning Point

January 22, 2017

Matthew 4:12-23

“From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” Repenting is more than apology. It is more than resolving guilt. In Aramaic, Jesus’ earthly native language, it means to change direction. In Greek the word means to come at things with a new mind.

Repenting means a change of life direction. Repenting means a change of behavior patterns. Repenting means a change of world view. Jesus proclaims the Turning Point. Jesus proclaims the Turning Point for those first disciples. Jesus proclaims the Turning Point for us. Jesus proclaims the Turning Point for the universe.

Those first disciples turned. They turned away from the safety and security of the family business. They turned toward the risk and adventure of the kingdom of God. They abandoned their current way of life. They embraced a new way of life. *“From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”* The theme of the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering captures it well. This changes everything.

This was no time stay home and mend nets. This was time for an adventure. G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "An adventure is, by its nature, a thing that comes to us. It is thing that chooses us, not a thing that we choose."

Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to do extraordinary things. Those first disciples were not the sharpest knives in the drawer. Jesus called ordinary people to do extra ordinary things. Jesus still does.

It’s not that God is wringing God’s hands waiting for us to act. *“From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”* Jesus doesn’t say, “The kingdom of heaven will come near when those disciples get their act together, save up enough money, and make sure they have enough accumulated vacation time.” Martin Luther reminds us in his Small Catechism, “God’s kingdom comes without our asking for it...”

The Kingdom comes. The question is will we come along. Luther finishes his reflection with these words: “but we ask in this prayer that it will also come among us.”

Calculations and course corrections can take us only so far. Then it’s time for courage. Here at Emanuel, we are “On the Verge.” You heard that phrase in our fall financial appeal. The Kingdom comes. Will we come along? Let us not draw back. We have been given so much—so much that it took a whole year to celebrate it! Let us not sin by asking for too little for our future.

Now is not the time to stay home and mend our nets.

Emanuel Lutheran Church has faced several turning points in the last one hundred and twenty-six years. Brave people labored for eight years during a nationwide financial crisis to construct the church building at Seventh and Mill Streets. Faithful people moved from Swedish to English in worship and education after the turn of the last century. They lived and served through the Great Depression and two World Wars.

In the late 1950's, they bought land and moved to North Broadway. They built a sanctuary and a parsonage. In the 1980's they built the new sanctuary in which we now worship. They—including many of you—made the two thousand dollar a month mortgage payments and gave us a congregation that is now debt-free.

Emanuel Lutheran Church now faces another turning point in our history. I believe that the creation of a Christian daycare here at Emanuel is the right direction to turn. Will we turn toward God's future or away from it? Will we embrace families with children in our neighborhood and community, or will we let someone else do that? Will we rest in safety and security or answer the Holy Spirit's call to risk and reach out?

I believe that safety and security will lead to slow decline and lingering congregational death. It won't happen in the next five or ten years. But it will happen. The evidence of Emanuel's history since 1989 supports my belief. I believe that the risk of faith leads to life and hope. I believe that is true for each of us as disciples. I believe that is true for our congregation. I believe that is true for our denomination as well.

Now is not the time to stay home and mend our nets.

I think of one of my favorite Luther quotes at this point: "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

There will be lots of details and decisions along the way. But the question before us now is direction. Which way will we turn? Let's pray...

Pastor Lowell Hennigs
Emanuel Lutheran Church
Council Bluffs, Iowa